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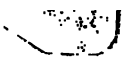
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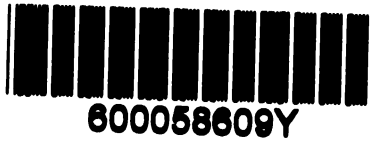
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BOBBIE AND BIRDIE




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BOBBIE AND BIRDIE.



BOBBIE AND BIRDIE;

OR,

Our Lady's Picture.

A STORY FOR THE VERY LITTLE ONES.

BY

FRANCES I. M. KERSHAW.





R. WASHBOURNE,
18 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON.
1882.

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BOBBIE AND BIRDIE.

CHAPTER I.

TWO LITTLE COUSINS.

PERHAPS you think my story is going to be about two little singing-birds, and the title certainly does sound rather like it; nevertheless, if you do, you are quite mistaken. Bobbie Bergin is a small boy of the advanced age of seven years, and his little girl-cousin, Birdie Novery, is just a few months younger. They may be called singing-birds in one sense, however, for two merrier little grigs it would be hard to find anywhere; and they sing sweet, chirping songs together too—songs that remind one of Robin Redbreast's before

the very cold weather comes—at least, they *are* sweet when Master Bobbie does not sing bass by way of adding to the effect.

Now I must describe to you what they are like—my tiny hero and heroine—for I want you to know and love them. They are both of a height, and therefore strangers seeing them together often take them for twins; but they are only cousins, after all. And their faces are not an atom alike. Bobbie's is a round, brown, saucy little face, containing—besides a tiny dimple in either soft cheek—a pair of dark-brown eyes that sparkle with fun and frolic; a flat sort of a nose, not beautiful, but very roguish-looking; and a red button of a mouth just below it. Then his hair—that is a glorious mop of goldy-brown stuff that turns every way, twists and tangles and tosses, and, of course, likes anything better than being brushed and combed. So much for Bobbie's appearance.

Now I must give you a peep at his little cousin Bertha, or Birdie, as she is always called. Birdie's is a small oval face, with a beautiful pink and white complexion that even the

summer sun is not able to spoil; large blue eyes she has—eyes that remind you of a deep, still lake when you look into them—a long, meek-looking nose with none of Bobbie's roguishness about it; a tiny rosebud mouth, and very white chin. Round her face everywhere hang long, golden curls the colour of ripe corn, which it is Nurse Nelly's delight to twist into shape every morning round her fingers. This is Birdie!

But I want to tell you a little more about Bobbie, so that you may get to know, not only his face, but himself.

Long ago—before Bobbie can remember even, though his memory goes back a respectable distance—his dear papa and mamma died. A terrible fever came, and took them both away to God, leaving Bobbie behind—a little weak, helpless baby. Bobbie had no relations left except Uncle Charlie—whom he and Birdie are not allowed to talk about now, only to pray for night and morning, because he is a bad man in some way that they are too young to understand about—and Aunt Hester Novery, Birdie's mamma.

Aunt Hester is kind and good. When Bobbie's parents died, she brought Bobbie to her own home, and has taken care of him, and loved him ever since, with her own little Birdie. And Bobbie is, of course, as happy as a summer's day—all little boys are who are healthy and strong, and who don't get their own way when they ought not to have it. He and Birdie think there are no two people in the world who love each other so fondly as they do; and perhaps there are very few. But with all his happiness, and the love that is all round him like summer sunshine, there is *something* that Bobbie wants still; something that even loving little Birdie cannot give him. Bobbie wants something to fill up an empty place in his heart—a little place that has been empty ever since he has found out that he hasn't a mother—and in finding out he hasn't, has felt how much, how *very* much, he wants her.

For, you see, when Aunt Hester takes Birdie on her knee to be loved and petted, there is no room left for Bobbie; and when kind Birdie slips down and offers him her

place, Bobbie doesn't quite like taking it. Aunt Hester is Birdie's mamma, and so, of course, Aunt Hester's lap is Birdie's, and not his. And poor little Bobbie's heart aches for *a lap quite his own.*

Birdie can't understand why Bobbie won't climb into her mamma's lap and be petted, but Aunt Hester knows, though she does not say anything about it; only, with Bobbie and Birdie by her side, she talks to them of paradise, where dear little Bobbie's papa and mamma are gone to dwell, seeing Jesus and His beautiful blessed Mother, and the happy Angels and Saints. She tells Bobbie that he will see his own mamma again some day, if he too loves and follows Jesus as she did, and prays always to His dear Mother and the Saints. Then Bobbie's heart grows glad and light again as he listens. It is so nice to think how up in heaven Jesus and Mary love Bobbie's mamma, and how down on earth Jesus and Mary love Bobbie. It makes heaven seem very near to the little boy.

Now I must tell you a little about where Bobbie and Birdie live. It is close to the

great, wild, weird, majestic forest of Sherwood, on the outskirts of the little country town Lonerton.

The river Mann runs through Lonerton, and the garden of Bobbie and Birdie's home slopes down to its banks. Bobbie sails boats there of his own manufacture, and tumbles headlong into the water sometimes; but it isn't really deep, so the only harm he gets is a thorough wetting, and a bit of a scolding from Nurse Nelly.

The house in which our little hero and heroine live is an old, straggling building called The Grange. It is old, for it has stood there so long that nobody has any idea of when it was built, unless perhaps the great forest oaks; but they have no voice to tell about it. It is straggling, for it has thrown out rooms and passages here and there and everywhere, higgledy-piggledy, much in the way that some naughty little boys scatter their clothes about their bedroom when they undress at night.

And just because it is so straggling and shapeless, it is a perfectly splendid place for

hide-and-seek. Indeed, it has so many long, dark, winding passages, so many mysterious doors, empty rooms, and hiding-places of all sorts, that Bobbie and Birdie are almost afraid to hide, for fear that, like the Babes in the Wood, they may never be found again.

The front windows of The Grange look down on the river, the back ones peep out at the great forest, with the long stretch of gorse-clump, bracken, and purple heather before it.

Bobbie and Birdie love the dear old Sherwood Forest, with all the warmth of their hearts. Famous games they have under its shade, and in the giant bracken, which is often higher than their heads. Bobbie even distinguished himself once by scrambling up a small oak, and sticking fast there; so that Nurse Nelly had to forget her dignity and everything else, to climb up after the venturesome young man, and then to descend again with him, packed ignominiously under her strong arm.

What Bobbie and Birdie love most is to sit under the shade of the old, old oaks, listening to Nurse Nelly's entrancing account of the

wondrous adventures of the famous Robin Hood and his Merry Men, who once ranged through that very same forest of Sherwood, and had perhaps even sat under the shade of the very identical oak as they did.

Bobbie and Birdie enjoy the delicious feeling of awe that creeps over them, as they listen to Nurse Nelly's strange old legends; and they stare at each other with eyes round and big with wonder, until the monotonous sound of Nurse Nelly's voice sends them to sleep at last, nestled on both sides of her.

Birdie wears a black frock when my story begins, because her dear papa, who was captain of a large ship, had been drowned a little while before. Bobbie looked very sad when he heard about it first. He had always intended to be a captain when he grew up, and have a good ship of his own like Uncle Robert; but he changed his mind now he found that even captains sailing in good ships met with a watery grave sometimes, like other sailors. He would not like Birdie to have to wear a black frock for him, he said considerately.

But while I tell you of Bobbie and Birdie, I must not omit to mention a somebody else. A very wee little somebody, who has brought a little sister to Birdie, and another small cousin to Bobbie. There is a baby at The Grange.

Bobbie doesn't like it at all, nor does Birdie. What is the use of anybody who can't play or even talk? The new baby can only cry, eat, and sleep, or lie on Nurse Nelly's lap, staring at them out of its dull blue eyes, that never seem to see anything, although they stare so hard.

When Bobbie had his first peep at the new baby, he inquired how soon she would be able to play with Birdie and himself like a rational being; and on finding that her capabilities in that respect were not likely to be developed for some time, this was his sole remark, uttered very disdainfully:

'Boys don't want babies any more than dolls. Send her back again, Nelly.'

And Birdie said:

'We don't want anybody but just our own two selves; do we, Bobbie?' which was quite Master Bobbie's own private opinion.

It is quite too bad, thinks Birdie, to be told that there must be no noise now or it will wake baby; that she and Bobbie may see mamma now but twice a day, and then only for a kiss, or they will make her ill.

Nurse Nelly has to keep careful guard over the new baby, or she would long ere now have come to grief between her two indignant little relatives.

Armed with a long darner from Nurse Nelly's work-basket, Bobby approached the cradle one day, and a 'Shall I poke?' which meant mischief to the little baby cousin.

Nurse Nelly rushed at him, shook him well in unwonted wrath, and snatched away the needle just in time to prevent a terrible catastrophe.

'She was wery cross,' said the sobbing and discomfited Bobbie; 'and I was only being Robin Hood, Birdie.'

And Birdie took the crestfallen robber under her wing, comforting him for the failure of his attack in a way that would have struck Nurse Nelly dumb with horror had she heard it.

CHAPTER II.

BIRDIE'S MAMMA.

'Two little voices blending—
Speaking to God in prayer;
One little message ascending,
Two little full hearts share.'

NURSE NELLY says 'Hush!' and looks very grave indeed, as she comes out of Mrs. Novery's room, and finds Bobbie and Birdie tearing up and down the long passage between it and the nursery. Both children stand still at once, and eagerly ask 'Why?'

'Poor mamma's very ill, and you must be quiet, or you will make her worse. I want you both to put on your hats, and ask Mr. Smith to come at once.'

Bobbie and Birdie's faces grow sober directly. Mr. Smith is the doctor; and isn't the thought of physic enough to sober anyone?

'We'll go, Nelly,' says Birdie; and they put on their hats, and go quietly down the garden and across the street.

'I'm afraid mamma's *very* ill,' says Birdie. 'If she wasn't, you know, Nelly's face wouldn't frown so, Bobbie.'

'Yes, I'm afraid so, too,' says Bobbie. 'Perhaps she's got measles.'

Measles is the only complaint which has ever troubled the even course of Bobbie's existence, so he naturally considers it the worst in the world.

'That's when those tiny red spots come, isn't it, Bobbie?' says Birdie, whose medical experience is even more limited than Bobbie's. 'And mamma hasn't got any spots; she's only all white. Didn't you see, last night?'

'Yes,' says Bobbie gravely; 'I saw. But then she couldn't eat her tea, and there was thin bread-and-butter too; that's what makes me think it's measles.'

They are chatting away so busily, these two little mites, that they don't notice a tall man coming towards them and intently reading a newspaper, until they both come stumbling up

against him, and he cries out 'Hullo!' and looks down to see what mischief has been done.

'You haven't hurt us, not a bit!' says Bobbie, in what is meant to be a reassuring tone, when he and Birdie have picked themselves up again; 'but you've muddied Birdie's frock. You're Mr. Smith's self, aren't you?'

'Yes,' answers the tall man. 'Do you want me?'

'Yes,' says Bobbie. 'At least—no, *I* don't; it was Nurse Nelly. She sent us to fetch you, because Birdie's mamma is very ill.'

The tall doctor slips his paper into his pocket, and asks: '*Whose* mamma is ill?'

'Birdie's,' says Bobbie calmly. 'But perhaps you don't know who Birdie is, because that is not her real name. Birdie is my—very—own—cousin!'

Bobbie says this very distinctly, gravely, and solemnly; but somehow it doesn't seem to make the matter any clearer to Mr. Smith. He looks decidedly puzzled.

'What do *you* call "Birdie's mamma"?' he asks at last.

'Me? Oh, Aunt Hester!' wondering why Mr. Smith wants to know.

Bobbie's answer doesn't mend matters at all

The doctor thinks a moment, then h says:

'*Show* me where "Aunt Hester" lives.'

Bobbie's fat fingers point one way, and hi curly head nods another.

'Come, then,' says the doctor, 'and *take* m to "Aunt Hester."'

Bobbie takes Birdie's hand, they face about and trot up the street, Mr. Smith followin closely.

'You are a very little mite to be trusted ou here with no one to take care of you,' he say addressing Bobbie, with the intention of makin himself agreeable. Having no children of h own, he is ignorant of the fact that if there anything little boys particularly dislike, it *to be called little boys.*

'I'm up to Nurse Nelly's apron-band!' cri the affronted Bobbie.

'He's up to her top button!' adds Birdie, a tone meant to inspire Mr. Smith with awe her cousin's gigantic proportions; the size

her Bobbie is no subject to be dealt with lightly, she thinks.

'That isn't very much, is it?' says Mr. Smith pleasantly, unconsciously adding insult to injury. 'I suppose you want to be a big man like me, some day, don't you?'

'No, I don't,' says downright Bobbie. 'When I'm a man, I mean to be handsome like my own papa's picture, and good too—as he was!'

This speech isn't very flattering to poor Mr. Smith, for it implies that, in Bobbie's estimation at least, *he* is the very opposite to his papa; so he only says 'H'm!' Bobbie opens the garden-gate, and they go up the path towards the house.

At the hall-door they come to a standstill. They hear the rustling of print skirts, stiffly starched, coming down the front stairs, and, peering through the glass of the door, Bobbie says:

'I see Nurse Nelly coming, Mr. Smith. *She'll* take you in, and tell you all about Aunt Hester. Birdie and I are going to stay in the garden. Come along, Birdie!'

The two children are running off, when a sudden idea strikes Bobbie, and he comes back again to the doctor.

'You must be *very* quiet, Mr. Smith,' he says. 'That baby wakes at anything, and a noise makes Aunt Hester worse. Birdie and I go on tip-toe gener'lly. I thought I'd just tell you, 'cos p'raps Nurse Nelly won't like to.' And Bobbie is off like a shot, to join his cousin.

During this sultry summer weather, the cool, thatched summer-house down by the riverside is the children's favourite retreat. Soft breezes come up there from the water to fan their hot cheeks, and the stream itself flows so coolly and deliciously just below them, singing 'songs without words,' always fresh and new. They often come here night and morning to say their prayers, and Bobbie has put up a little black crucifix and an image of the Blessed Virgin just above their heads. Thither their little feet carry them now, panting and breathless. They sit down on the rustic bench inside to rest, and for some time there is a most unusual silence between them.

At last, tired of silence, Bobbie bursts out impetuously:

'I *don't* like him *at all*, Birdie; do you? I 'spec' he'll be giving Aunt Hester something bad, to make her worse, on purpose!'

'He has a nice, kind voice,' says Birdie; 'and I don't think he is really so *very* bad. But,' she adds loyally, 'I won't like him, Bobbie, if you don't want me to.'

Then there is silence for a few seconds.

'Poor mamma!' says Birdie at last; 'I do wish she weren't so very ill. I'm afraid sometimes, Bobbie,' the little girl goes on sadly, 'that she'll get iller and iller, and then I shan't have any mamma.'

'Like me!' says Bobbie sorrowfully. 'And then I shouldn't have any Aunt Hester either! But you needn't be afraid, Birdie. Jesus will take care of her for us, and so will His Blessed Mother. They know we can't spare her.'

'I'm not sure about that,' says Birdie, still more sadly. 'Of course They know we want mamma; but then God took *your* mamma away, Bobbie; and you wanted *her* very much, didn't you?'

'Yes,' Bobbie says, with a little sigh; 'but p'raps He thought Aunt Hester 'd do for me instead. And, you see, if He were to take away Aunt Hester, there'd be nobody to do instead—so I don't think He will, Birdie dear!'

'You do want your mamma sometimes now, don't you, Bobbie?' asks Birdie, partly comforted by Bobbie's little speech.

'Often!' says Bobbie. 'But you know, Birdie, Jesus has got her and papa up there with Him, ever so happy, taking care of them for me!' and Bobbie points up to the blue of the sky. 'I don't think I mind so much now Aunt Hester has told me *that*, because my Angel will take me there too some day, if I love Jesus, and try not to be naughty; and then I shan't ever have them go away again. I *do* love Jesus now, Birdie; and I keep on asking our Mother Mary to make me love Him *ever so much*.'

'I wish we could see Jesus, like the Angels and Saints!' says Birdie wistfully, following Bobbie's fingers with her eyes as they point upwards. 'I like to go to Mass; don't you,

Bobbie? because He is there in the Blessed Sacrament. But even then we can't *see* Him. When we pray to Him, it's like asking mamma for something in the dark.'

'He can see us though,' says Bobbie; 'and He gives us what we ask Him for; so I don't think it matters *very* much about the dark. We *shall* see Him some day, Aunt Hester says.'

Birdie slips down from her seat by Bobbie's side, and putting her lips close to his ear, whispers shyly:

'Ask Him for mamma, shall we?'

Bobbie looks puzzled; he doesn't understand her.

'Ask Jesus to take care of her for us, and make her well soon,' explains Birdie.

'So we will,' answers Bobbie promptly. 'Kneel down here, Birdie dear, cross yourself, and we'll put our hands together and ask Him.'

'You say it all,' says Birdie; ''cos you know best how to ask.'

'Shall I call her "Aunt Hester," or "Mamma"?' inquires Bobbie. 'You see

she's both. She's your mamma as well as my Aunt Hester.'

'I don't think it matters which,' Birdie answers thoughtfully. 'P'r'aps, as you're asking, you'd better say "Aunt Hester.' But Jesus knows *her very own self,* Bobbie, so it doesn't make any difference what we call her.'

The two little cousins kneel down together before the crucifix, their hands clasped, and their eyes reverently bent; and presently Bobbie says, very distinctly and earnestly in his shrill little voice:

'Please, dear Jesus, Birdie and me want You to make dear Aunt Hester well soon. Nurse Nelly says she is very ill, and she has to have the doctor. Please do take care of her, 'cos of Birdie and me.' A pause. 'Now Birdie, let us both of us say a "Hail Mary" for Aunt Hester.'

The two earnest voices blend in prayer, and then they rise from their knees, a happy contentment in their faces, and Birdie asks wonderingly:

'Did He *really* hear what we said, Bobbie

We are such *very* little children, and He is *so* high up in heaven!'

'I *know* He heard,' replies Bobbie confidently, and a little reprovingly (Birdie's want of faith is often a source of trouble to him). 'You are always being afraid that Jesus won't do what you ask Him. I should think you make Him very sad sometimes, and your Angel too, Birdie! Why, Birdie, only think!' —and Bobbie's voice grows deep and tremulous with the greatness of his thought—'He came down here to be hurt and killed for us once, you know, Aunt Hester says; because He loved us so much! *I* couldn't do that—not even *for you*, Birdie—it would hurt so terribly much! And if Jesus could love us enough to die for us, I am quite pos'tif'ly sure He will listen to our prayers, Birdie.'

'Yes,' says Birdie quietly; 'I had forgotten that.'

Then hand-in-hand the two children go up the garden-walk again. It is time to be tidied for dinner. They meet Nurse Nelly, just coming to shepherd up her two stray lambs.

'How is Aunt Hester now, Nelly?' Bobbie

asks, his mind full of the prayer just prayed by the river, and of the answer to be so surely forthcoming to it.

'She is better,' answers Nurse Nelly. 'But you must both be as still as mice.'

Bobbie turns to Birdie with a happy, satisfied nod of his curly head, that seems to say:

'You see, faithless Birdie!'

And Birdie nods back again, with penitent tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER III.

AN INVITATION DECLINED.

'Long shadows were gathering round her bed;
Faint was the gleam that the taper shed;
None knew she was dying till life had fled,
But she alone: and the words that she said
Were just, "God care for my own little lambs,
When their mother, their mother is dead."'

THE GRANGE is very hushed and still the next few days.

When Anne, the cook, brings up the children's meals to the nursery, she always leaves her shoes at the stairfoot; and Nurse Nelly wears soft felt slippers that never make any noise. Bobbie and Birdie are very quiet too, and do their best not to disturb the poor invalid. Only when the doctor comes daily there is the thump, thump of his heavy boots down the long passage, and a loud whisper of questions which he asks Nurse Nelly on the way.

Bobbie and Birdie must not even see mamma twice in the day now; and every time that they peep at Mr. Smith through the keyhole of the nursery door, as he comes out of the sick-room, they notice that his face has grown graver and graver. Nurse Nelly, too, often comes into the nursery with eyes that look suspiciously like crying.

One day, Mr. Smith, instead of passing the nursery door, as usual, on his way from Mrs. Novery's room, comes right in—startling Bobbie and Birdie to such an extent, that the grand brick castle they are busy building falls to the ground with a crash, and both

children dart on to their feet, crying out indignantly:

'There now! If the noise makes her worse it'll be every bit your fault.'

'I'm very sorry—very sorry indeed! It was most unlucky!' says Mr. Smith apologetically. 'But listen—I've got something to tell you young folks.'

'Medicine?' inquires Bobbie suspiciously. 'We're not ill—Birdie and me!'

'Nobody would ever imagine it for a moment, Master Sturdy,' says the doctor good-humouredly. 'No—what I want to tell you is, that I've got a dear old soul of a housekeeper at home, a Mrs. Cuddles—and she's particularly partial to little folks like you.'

'We wouldn't change Nurse Nelly for her!' interrupts Bobbie, suspecting some plot on Mr. Smith's part for substituting Mrs. Cuddles for their own Nurse Nelly.

'Dear me, no!' Mr. Smith answers, taken rather aback; 'I shouldn't like the exchange at all. I didn't mean to propose anything of the sort. It's Nurse Nelly, on the contrary, who thinks she can dispense with *you* for a few

days. She is very busy waiting upon dear mamma and baby all day and all night long, now; so I thought, perhaps, out of kindness to her, you wouldn't mind staying with my Mrs. Cuddles for a time, to be out of her way, eh, Master Sturdy?'

'Thank you,' says Bobbie, acting as spokesman for himself and Birdie; 'but we couldn't ever leave Aunt Hester now she's so ill. And we don't make the very leastest bit of noise,' he adds earnestly.

'We aren't any trouble,' says Birdie. 'I button up Bobbie's tunic in the morning where he can't reach, and he helps to dress me. And Bobbie pours out the milk for both of us at breakfast without spilling a drop. We aren't no trouble at all to Nurse Nelly—Bobbie and me.'

'I've such a lot of pretty things in my house,' says Mr. Smith in his most coaxing tone. 'Pictures, books, dogs, cats, and whole glass cases full of the most beautiful birds.'

'Don't they break the glass when their wings flap?' asks Birdie.

'They can't flap, Miss Blue-eyes, for they are all dead and stuffed.'

'I don't like *dead* things,' says Bobbie solemnly; 'they're only good to look at. They can't fly about, or sing, or do anything.'

'Who made them dead, Mr. Smith?' questions Birdie.

'I shot a few of them myself,' answers the doctor modestly; 'the rest came from countries very far away.'

'I think you are 'stremely cruel,' says Bobbie severely; 'and you'd better ask Nurse Nelly about it before you shoot any more of the poor birds. She told *me*,' continues Bobbie gravely, fixing his big eyes full on the doctor's face, 'when I was *not nearly* so old as you, and had caught a sparrow in my trap, with a poor hurt wing, that perhaps somebody would come and put me in a trap too, and hurt my wings—no, not my wings,' says Bobbie, correcting himself quickly, 'because I haven't got any; it would be my arms, I s'pose. So I didn't ever catch any more birds. But I'm afraid a big man will come and put *you* in a trap some day, 'cos it's *a great deal crueller* to put them in glass cases *after* you've killed them!'

Bobbie stops at the end of his long speech, puffing for breath; as for the doctor, he bursts into such a hearty fit of laughter that he only disgusts Bobbie the more, and Birdie glares at him with her blue eyes.

'Then I suppose I shall have to tell Mrs. Cuddles not to make any cakes, shall I?' says the doctor, as a final appeal, when his fit of laughter has sufficiently subsided to allow him to speak.

'Yes,' says Bobbie decidedly; 'if you were going to have them made on purpose for us, you will—'cos we're not coming. But don't you want some for yourself?'

'I'm not very fond of cakes,' Mr. Smith says. 'You see, I have most to do with giving other people physic when they've eaten too many.'

'Then I 'spec' they don't make the cakes right if they get ill with them,' says Bobbie. 'Our Anne does. *She* makes them *beautifully!* They don't ever make us ill—'cept a little pain when we eat too many,' adds truthful Bobbie.

'Well, good-bye, both of you!' says the doctor. 'I'm going to see a little girl who is ill.'

'Cake?' inquires Bobbie.

'No,' says Mr. Smith; 'just because sh hasn't had *enough* cake, or food of any sort Little Polly Dacre it is——'

The doctor vanishes with his great basket so full of its medical mysteries.

After his departure the children busy themselves in repairing the ruinous castle, until Nurse Nelly comes into the nursery, with red eyes, and an apron that looks as if it had been sprinkled ready for ironing—to bid them come with her; Mrs. Novery has asked to see them.

With grave little faces and noiseless feet the two cousins go hand-in-hand down the long passage to the invalid's room.

How dark it is in there! The blinds are drawn, with the curtains over them, and only the faint flicker of a night-lamp makes a break in the darkness. How shadowy, how solemnly silent the room is! The furniture casts deep black shadows over the floor and walls; and the tiny gleam of the night-light wanders over the face of the pale baby, lying in its pretty blue bassinet. Over the bed, too, where Mrs. Novery lies, shadows creep and then pass away, leav-

ing behind them the dimly distinguishable outline of the invalid's white, patient face—oh, so worn and thin! There is a deeper shadow still falling upon that darkened room—the Shadow of Death.

Nurse Nelly knows it, so she sheds bitter tears. The doctor knows it, and he has done the utmost his skill can do for her, in vain. But how shall these little ones know it—bright in their youthful happiness, as yet all unclouded?

> 'A simple child
> That lightly draws its breath,
> And feels life in every limb—
> What should it know of death?'

Nothing! But the shadow is falling though they see it not.

To Mrs. Novery herself, death comes as a kind release from pain of body and soul. Hearts that have long been turned to heaven in faith and love, rejoice when their spirit takes its flight thither, to dwell in an eternity of sight. She has just received the last beautiful Sacrament of the Church at the hands of her priest, and is waiting now to hear the homeward call.

Mrs. Novery's only trouble is, that she must leave her little Birdie and Baby Hetty, without one in the wide world to care for them; and the boy who is to her as her own child, friendless and alone, with no father's hand to guide and control that high spirit and impetuous will—no mother's heart to love and sympathise with that little soul so hungry and thirsting for love. This trouble, this care, Mrs. Novery has cast upon the heart of the tender Mother of Mercy, praying that she will be with the little ones. so early left alone in the great stranger world.

With solemn faces the two children come round to her bedside, and Nurse Nelly holds them up for a kiss—the last she will ever give them.

'So white!' murmurs Birdie, stroking the thin cheek softly.

'We've asked Jesus to make you better, Birdie and I, auntie dear,' says Bobbie. 'You *are* going to be better soon, aren't you?'

'Very soon, darlings,' comes Mrs. Novery's voice, like a faint echo from some distant

cave. 'Very soon all the pain will be gone, and Jesus will make me quite well.'

'O Lord,' she prays, laying her poor thin hands on both little soft heads; 'Lord Jesus, when Thou takest me away, leave them not orphans, but come unto them, and lead them safely through life to the heavenly city! Oh, keep them true to Thy Church and Thy Truth, in the midst of defection and error! Oh, Holy Mother of Jesus, be a mother to my little ones, and teach them to love Thee!'

Then Nurse Nelly leads the children gently away to the nursery, and goes back herself to the sick-room; sitting there in silence and among the shadows, wiping her eyes noiselessly with her apron now and again.

'Nelly! Are you there, Nelly?' comes the invalid's faint whisper; and Nelly's voice answers, 'Yes, ma'am.'

'Open the desk on my table with the key from my jewel-case,' says Mrs. Novery, 'and bring me the letter lying open just inside.'

Nurse Nelly obeys, and brings the letter to her mistress's bedside.

'I'm *so* tired,' murmurs the dying woman,

'that I have not strength to say to you now all I could wish. This letter will tell you something of what I cannot say. Take the greatest care of it, Nelly. It is to my only brother. I know not where he lives, or indeed if he be still alive, for we have not heard of each other since my marriage. It is a sore subject, Nelly, but I must tell you something of the reason for the children's sake. My brother was brought up a Catholic like the rest of us, and he had made up his mind to enter Holy Orders; but while passing through the preliminary studies, his heart was carried away by the beauty of a young Protestant lady. He gave up his first holy intentions, gave up his religion, gave us all up—and married her. He had great taste for painting, and I believe that after his marriage he took to painting as a profession. If alive now, he will be the only relative left to my children. If ever you meet with him, Nelly, tell him that day and night I have prayed for him, and will pray for him, that he may be converted to the truth he has denied; but, promise me, Nelly, that you will never, never let my children pass

out of your care into the hands of a Protestant!'

'Oh, my dear mistress, I promise, I promise —all you can ask!' sobs Nelly.

'I have no one with whom to leave my children,' the dying woman murmurs, 'but to our dear Lord and His Blessed Mother, and to your loving care, Nelly!'

'*He'll* never let 'em want, ma'am!' interrupts Nelly earnestly; 'and as for me, I'd slave for 'em day and night sooner!'

'You would—I know you would; and I can never thank you enough for it; but God will know how to reward you. He said, "Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these My little ones, you did it to Me." Yours is far more than the "cup of cold water," Nelly! I know your charge will be most faithfully fulfilled, though you will sometimes find it hard to make both ends meet. Oh, Nelly, never lose your hope in God! Teach my little ones to love and serve their Lord, and to be true to their Holy Faith!'

'I will, missis! I will!' murmurs the sobbing Nelly.

Then, gently and gradually, the dying woman's eyes close, and she sleeps.

Nelly kneels by the bedside, half in prayer, half listening with a heart full of anguish to the laboured, hardly-drawn breath of her beloved mistress. Then rising, she replaces the precious letter in the desk, and softly leaves the room.

CHAPTER IV.

BOBBIE'S PRAYER IS ANSWERED.

'COME in, Birdie! We may, for I've knocked ever so long, and nobody says "No."'

It is Bobbie and Birdie at the sick-room door next morning.

Bobbie opens the door, leads Birdie in, and gently closes it after them.

'It's very dark in here,' says Birdie, with a little shiver; 'and so bright outside, Bobbie!'

They creep round to the bedside, wondering to find a sheet laid over it. Bobbie draws it aside, and Birdie strokes the pale, white face

of her mother, whose thin hands are crossed upon her breast over an ivory crucifix.

'She is *so* cold,' says Birdie sadly. 'Nelly must have put the sheet on to make her warm.'

'She is asleep,' says Bobbie; 'fast asleep. You know she couldn't get to sleep before, Nurse Nelly said. We will draw up the window-blinds, Birdie, and let the sun warm her poor, cold face.'

He does so; and the glorious sun-rays come streaming in over the white face on the bed.

'My beautiful mamma!' cries little Birdie, as the colour of the crimson bed-curtains is carried in soft, rosy tints down her mother's cheeks by the brilliant sun.

'Aunt Hester said she would be well soon, Birdie,' says Bobbie, taking a long look; 'very soon! Then she will be able to come into the garden again, and talk to us about Jesus, as she used to. Won't that be nice, Birdie?'

'We will ask her all we don't know *then*,' says Birdie; 'all that Nurse Nelly can't tell us, Birdie. About why God lets nice people be sick and ill, and why He hasn't made her

well quick, when we've asked Him so often. Won't it be nice!'

'Yes, everything will be nice when Aunt Hester gets well—but it's a *very* long time to wait!' says Bobbie, with a sigh, looking at the white, wasted face on the pillow: for the crimson sunbeam has fled away up the curtains.

'Kiss mamma, Bobbie,' says Birdie presently, 'and then we will go. Poor, cold mamma! even the bright sun doesn't warm you.'

The little girl gently prints a kiss on her mother's cheek, and Bobbie follows her example.

At the door they find themselves face to face with Nurse Nelly. Bobbie puts up his finger, and whispers joyfully, 'Aunt Hester's *ever* so fast asleep now, Nelly! Birdie and me have been kissing her, and she didn't wake.'

Nurse Nelly's apron goes up to her eyes as quick as lightning, but not before a tear-drop has fallen heavily on Bobbie's uplifted finger.

'Don't cry, Nelly,' he says coaxingly. 'Aunt Hester's gone to sleep 'cos she's going to be well very soon—she said so!'

Nurse Nelly only kneels down, and draws the two little cousins close to her with a big sob.

'You don't know what you're saying, poor lamb!' she sobs; 'and how should you? You don't understand that my poor, dear mistress won't never speak to anyone in this world again! She went in the night—may her soul rest in peace!'

'Mamma is still there, Nelly,' says Birdie gently—'not gone anywhere; and the bright sunbeam did make her look *so* beautiful!'

'Where did Aunt Hester go to in the night?' asks little Bobbie.

'The Lord Jesus sent the Angels, and they took her away, Master Bobbie dear.'

'And then they brought her back again,' says Bobbie contentedly. 'Perhaps the Lord Jesus only wants to take her away to make her well!'

'Ay, she's quite well now,' murmurs Nurse Nelly, drying her eyes; 'better than ever before. Who knows but she's singing with the Angels by now?'

'Not singing, Nelly,' says little Birdie; 'asleep.'

'How shall I ever make you understand it all?' murmurs Nurse Nelly sadly. 'Your ma is most like in heaven by now, Miss Birdie, with Jesus and Our Blessed Lady—for she *was* a saint, if ever was one!—p'r'aps beggin' them to give an eye to you little ones, now there's nobody left to do it but me, as don't scarcely know how! *She* ain't asleep, Miss Birdie dear!'

'Oh, Nelly, Nelly!' cries Bobbie impatiently; 'you don't know anything about it. You don't know how Birdie and me have been asking Jesus for *ever* so long to make Aunt Hester quite well. He hasn't taken her away, Nelly. Come and see.'

Nelly lets herself be drawn into the room by the children; but, at the sight of her dear mistress, sorrow again overcomes her, and she hides her face in her hands, weeping bitterly.

'You see *now*, Nelly, don't you?' asks Bobbie.

'She's gone, Master Bobbie,' sobs Nelly; 'She's gone—quite away from sickness and sin; but oh, she's left an empty place behind her!'

'Nelly,' says Bobbie severely, 'you don't trust Jesus one bit, or you'd never say so! I think you're like the story of the blind man who couldn't see—only it's because *you won't.* The good angels have brought Aunt Hester back again.'

Nurse Nelly says nothing in reply. She only covers the white face once more, and leads the children back to the nursery. In spite of all her words, they are still unconscious of the sad truth that the loving face which has never failed to smile on them during the seven years of their life, can never beam down upon them again; that those sweet lips which for just so long have constantly spoken words of comfort, love, and interest in all their little joys and griefs, have passed on out of reach of their lives, and can never speak to them again on earth.

CHAPTER V.

BOBBIE'S BLACK CLOTHES AND BROTHERHOOD.

Bobbie and Birdie know now that their dearest earthly friend is gone from them.

It is the day of the funeral.

Early in the morning Bobbie awakes to find Birdie still sleeping peacefully beside him, and Nurse Nelly busy laying out various little black garments on her own bed. Bobbie sits up and watches her intently—his elbows on his knees, and his head propped up by his hands.

'Nelly,' he whispers at last, with an anxious glance at the two little piles of clothing, evidently intended for himself and Birdie, 'where is my holland tunic with the red braid? I don't see it.'

'You won't want it, Master Bobbie,' answers Nurse Nelly. 'You must wear black for your poor aunt.'

'But I don't like black, Nelly,' says poor Bobbie; 'it's ugly. I like my nice holland tunic, and Aunt Hester liked it the best. Birdie calls it my "lady-bird suit," and she'll

say the other is "black-beetles," I know she will.'

'Miss Bertha will have a black frock too,' says Nurse Nelly, in a tone of consolation. 'She must wear one for her poor ma.'

'Nelly,' says Bobbie severely, 'didn't you tell me yesterday that we've got to be just like Aunt Hester—just as good and everything?'

'Yes, I did, Master Bobbie,' answers Nelly; 'you couldn't neither of you follow a better, no how. She *was* a saint, my mistress was!'

'Nelly,' Bobbie goes on, returning to his first subject without waiting for an answer to his question, 'if we wear *black* clothes we shan't be like Aunt Hester, shall we? They don't wear black frocks in heaven. I know Aunt Hester's got a very nice *white* one up there! Then why should we wear black things, Nelly?'

'Because,' answers Nelly, struggling hard to find a reason, 'because you are sorry that your Aunt Hester is gone, aren't you, Master Bobbie? and black clothes *say* like that you are.'

'But we *oughtn't* to be very sorry,' persists Bobbie. 'It would be selfish to be sorry that she is not sick and ill any more. Only I can't help being *a little* sorry sometimes, 'cos of *ourselves*,' adds Bobbie, with a sigh. 'And if I wear a black suit, to tell people so, it'll only make me worse, Nelly.'

'Well, Master Bobbie,' Nelly says slowly, 'you see there is a many things that *you* can't see just yet. When you're as old as I am you'll know——'

'If *you* know, tell *me*,' puts in Bobby calmly.

'We must do some things because—everybody else does them, Master Bobbie;' and Nelly leaves the room to escape Bobbie and his black clothes.

Bobbie lies down again with another deep sigh. He never likes to leave a question undecided, but this time there seems no help for it. Afterwards he rehearses to Birdie, as they go out into the garden, duly arrayed in the obnoxious black garments, the whole conversation that has passed between himself and Nurse Nelly on the subject. Bobbie winds up by declaring:

'I don't believe Nelly knows, Birdie. If there is a reason why we should wear those ugly black things it's too deep down for Nelly to reach—like the water in the garden well. That's there, only the bucket-rope isn't long enough to draw it up. If we do just what everybody else does,' continues Bobbie, with a philosophic air, 'why we shan't ever do anything, because people all do different things. Or, if we *could* do what everybody else does, we might all have to beat our wives; as Anne told me, before she went, that her bad brother did, when I wanted to know what she was crying about. Nelly doesn't know, Birdie; and *I* wanted to—*so* much! There's nobody to tell us anything now, Birdie.'

In the afternoon is the funeral.

Bobbie and Birdie follow their mother, and so does Nurse Nelly, with Baby Hetty in her arms and a handkerchief to her eyes.

The little orphans are too much taken up with the novelty of the whole proceeding to think of the sad meaning it has for them; if indeed they fully realise their loss as yet.

They both carry handfuls of sweet flowers to drop into the grave.

'Mamma loves flowers so much,' Birdie had said, 'she shall have them down there in the dark;' and she and Bobbie gathered their sweetest and best.

Many women and children are gathered round the grave. Some of them bring wreaths and crosses of flowers to strew over the corpse. The dead lady used to be very good to them, and they miss her now.

'We'll be sure to say many an "Our Father" and "Hail Mary" for her soul, dear lady!' they murmur, weeping.

When it is all over, the women come to Nurse Nelly and pour out their honest sympathy with her and the little ones till she cries again. They mean to be kind, but they don't know the way.

Nurse Nelly holds Hetty tightly to her and hurries away from them all, leaving Bobbie and Birdie to follow.

The eyes of the village children—among whom stands pale, hollow-cheeked little Polly Dacre—are filled with tears at the sight of the

two lovely children going hand-in-hand down the narrow, moss-grown cemetery path; and the older folk say feelingly:

'Poor little lone dears! May Our Blessed Lady love them, seein' they've lost their own mother!'

And then women and children alike return to their homes and to the toil and moil of daily life, while the two sad little hearts left alone in the world slip from their sight and memory.

'So deep down they put her, Bobbie,' says Birdie; 'I couldn't even see the flowers. Oh, Bobbie! wouldn't you be very 'fraid if you had to be put in a grave all alone in the dark, and the earth covering you up every bit? I think it's *dreadful!*'

'I don't know,' Bobbie answers thoughtfully; 'I've never tried, Birdie. But Aunt Hester can't *feel* it, for she isn't down there. She's somewhere up in the sky, Birdie, you know.'

'I *don't* know!' says Birdie. 'They put her in the grave.'

'Oh, Birdie!' answers grieved Bobbie, 'you *won't* believe a bit! Don't you remember how

Aunt Hester told us that it's only our "*outsides,*" our bodies, that *really* die? the "*us*" goes on living always. Like the rook's eggs, she said, you know, when the young ones come out and fly about, and only the poor, broken shells are left. Aunt Hester's shell is in the grave, but she is up in the sky. Don't you see, Birdie?'

'I see,' says Birdie, a little doubtfully.

'Birdie,' says Bobbie again, 'why do you think Father Earle called Aunt Hester "dear sister" ever so many times when he was talking to us all after the prayers?'

'I didn't hear him say anything,' Birdie admits. 'The people all stared so—I couldn't listen.'

'Couldn't you?' says Bobbie; 'well, I did. And he called Aunt Hester his sister. I don't think she is though, or he would be our uncle; wouldn't he, Birdie? and he hadn't black clothes on either.'

'Perhaps they were underneath,' suggests Birdie. 'I'd like Father Earle's sister-in-law for an aunt; wouldn't you, Bobbie?'

'Rather!' says Bobbie. 'Perhaps she is

too! Mrs. Earle has such a nice face; I think her white hair makes her look perfectly beautiful. If she only had a crown on, Birdie, she'd look like a queen.'

'There's a compliment to carry home to your sister, Father Earle,' says a voice behind the children, that they at once recognise as Mr. Smith's; and sure enough up comes their enemy the doctor with the venerable priest by his side.

'What were you saying just now, Bobbie?' he asks.

Bobbie gravely repeats his last words, and adds:

'Father Earle, is Aunt Hester your sister?'

'No, little boy,' says the old priest kindly; 'what made you think so?'

'Why, you told the people so to-day,' answers Bobbie, 'when they had put her in the grave; and I thought priests always spoke the truth. You said it a great many times, Father!'

'I see—I see,' says the gentle old priest, laying his hand on Bobbie's shoulder. 'So you listened to what I said, did you, my child?

Yes, in that sense we are all brothers and sisters, childie; for we have all the One Father above. And don't you know what the Catechism says, little boy, about the Angels and Saints being also our friends and brethren? Why should we ask the Angels and Saints to pray for us?'

Bobbie repeats quite correctly:

'We should ask the Angels and Saints to pray for us because they are our friends and brethren, and because their prayers have great power with God.'

'"Friends and brethren," Bobbie,' repeats Father Earle. 'And now, what does the Catechism say about a dearer friend, whose prayers have still more power with God? Is the Blessed Virgin also our Mother?'

'Yes,' Bobbie answers readily; 'the Blessed Virgin is also our Mother, because, as we are the brethren of Jesus, we are the children of Mary.'

'Very nicely remembered, little boy!' says the priest kindly. 'There now you see, childie, that God the Father is our father; Jesus Christ is our brother; the Blessed Mary is

our mother; the Angels and Saints are our brethren; and we all brothers and sisters one to another.'

'Well, I've never thought of *that* before!' exclaims Bobbie, who is never troubled with shyness, and will speak as freely before strangers as to his dearest friends. 'It's *very* nice! Then I am Birdie's brother, and Nurse Nellie is my sister, and Mr. Smith is my brother, and—why, we've got Mrs. Earle for a sister, after all, Birdie; and that's quite as good as an aunt. I thought there was nobody left but Birdie, and me, and Nelly—and there's *everybody!*'

Bobby's eyes shine very brightly as he speaks, and something like a rain-drop (only it isn't one) trickles down Mr. Smith's cheek, and hides itself in his big, bushy beard.

'Little boy,' Father Earle says, 'you and Birdie must go and pay Mrs. Earle a visit. She will love her little brother very much, I think, when she gets to know him—and her Marion too!'

'My black suit, or my "lady-bird"?' asks

Bobbie, in animated tones. 'I'll go to see her in whichever you like best, Father!'

'Let's say "lady-bird," then,' said Mr. Smith, smiling through his—rain-drops.

'Father Earle,' says the doctor, when they have parted from the children, 'my bachelor soul is greatly interested in those two little mites. Mrs. Novery was very reserved on the subject of her private affairs; but I fancy, from words she let fall at odd times, that they are very indifferently provided for. Captain Novery, and well-nigh all he possessed, went down in the *Claude* a few months ago. His widow, I fancy, did a good deal towards the maintenance of herself and the children by taking in fancy needlework from the shops, previous to her illness; but even *that* miserable pittance is, of course, stopped now. How to render them any assistance I know not. That old nurse of theirs, who clings to them so faithfully, would rather starve than accept of anything she considered charity, I verily believe.'

'She seems wonderfully devoted to the children,' Father Earle remarks.

'You are right. I heard the reason from Mrs. Novery's own lips. Old Mrs. Novery was the means of rescuing Nelly Barton, when a young girl, from a career of crime and misery in London. She took her as nursemaid to her own children, keeping her eye constantly upon her, until, by dint of good example and precept, the girl became a thoroughly trustworthy and most faithful servant. When Mrs. Novery's eldest son married, she went as nurse to his children—Birdie and Bobbie. The faithful creature cares for them as though they were her own; and certainly they reward her love with all the warm affection of their young hearts. But—they cannot *live* upon love, and I am afraid that is pretty much what it comes to. Father Earle, cannot *you* suggest some way of helping them? I can see none.'

'Wait a while,' says the gentle old priest. 'We will keep our eyes open, and the way will be made clear.'

'Nelly,' says Bobby solemnly, as both children enter the nursery, 'do you know that you are my sister? my oldest sister, I

think. We've got such a lot of brothers and sisters, Father Earle says, Nelly!'

'Bless the boy! What'll he be thinking of next?' exclaims Nurse Nelly. '*Me* your sister, my dear; when I'm old enough for a granny, let alone a great-granny! You'll be saying the Queen's your sister next, Master Bobbie—like enough!'

'Yes,' says Bobbie calmly; 'so she is. It's rather nice to have a sister with a crown on!'

'Perhaps mamma has got a crown on, too, Bobbie,' puts in Birdie; 'a much beautifuller one!'

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW HOME, AND A PEEP AT SOMEBODY ELSE.

'Who next shall enter the dear old place,
With a stranger life, and a stranger face?'

GOOD-BYE at last to the dear old home by the river!

Bobbie and Birdie say farewell to each individual treasure that must of necessity be

left behind—from the tiny twin garden-beds which are their special pride and delight, to the dear old nursery with its numberless pleasant memories and associations.

The Grange is theirs no longer now. Perhaps other children's voices will echo through its old walls, and other little feet patter down its long passages. From henceforth Bobbie and Birdie's home is to be 'Floral Cottage,' a neat little dwelling, covered in front with cluster-roses, and boasting even a tiny garden, though it stands almost in the middle of the town.

Bobbie and Birdie find themselves all too busy with gathering together treasures too precious to be left behind to spend much time in lamenting over leaving the dear old home. As for Nurse Nelly, she is occupied in pondering deeply over a hard question that must be answered somehow before long.

This it is. How shall all their household belongings ever find their way from the Grange to Floral Cottage without Job Jebbson's help and that of his horse and cart? It is a sad fact, but one past all con-

tradiction, that Job Jebbson asks payment for any work done by himself or his horse, or both; and money is a scarce article with poor Nurse Nelly.

But then the question still remains to be answered, how will everything get moved without him?

Nurse Nelly determines to waste no more precious time thinking over the matter. With Bobbie and Birdie, and their armful of toys and treasures by her side, and Baby Hetty tucked away somewhere under her arm, she sallies forth from the Grange, carrying two of the nursery chairs.

People may stare as the funny party marches down the street; but as Nurse Nelly looks neither to the right hand nor to the left, she doesn't see them.

As they pass the doctor's house, Bobbie catches a glimpse of his good-natured face at the window; only a glimpse, however, for before he has time to direct Birdie's attention to the fact, the doctor has vanished.

When Nurse Nelly returns to the Grange for a fresh load, having safely deposited her

chairs in the new home, great is her astonishment on finding the doctor's man waiting at the door with his cart, and a polite message from the doctor himself, asking whether man and cart can *possibly* be of any use to Nurse Nelly in removing her furniture, as it will be a *great* pleasure to him if they can, and a *great* privation to him if they can't.

'Well,' says Nurse Nelly, 'I don't see as I can say no to the master's kind offer, for it don't do to hurt nobody's feelings. And if there be a pleasure as I have it in my power to give him, he shall have it sure enough, for he's been right kind to my dear missis as was!'

So the doctor's cart plies steadily the whole day between Grange and Cottage, bearing load after load of furniture, until at last the one is empty and the other full, to Nurse Nelly's great content. And she has done the doctor a kindness into the bargain!

Then the little party install themselves in Floral Cottage, and the old Grange stands there by the river, silent and forsaken, waiting for some one to rouse and occupy it. '"Who will that be?" said the bells of Stepney?'

Away to hot, dusty, musty, fusty, breathless summer London our thoughts must carry us now, and set us down in one of the houses in Westbourne Terrace. It is as cool here as anywhere in London, perhaps, but hot is the coolest place to-day. The venetians are down, and the windows thrown wide open, to catch every breath of fresh air; and what little there is does come in.

Still, it seems almost unbearably hot to a dear little pale-faced girl who, dressed in the daintiest of white-frilled frocks and blue ribbons, lies on a sofa just under one of the open windows.

She appears to be a year or two older than our friend Birdie; but you may look in vain on these little thin, white cheeks for the roses that bloom so freshly on Birdie's.

It is a poor little, patient face, with a pair of very large grey eyes in it—so large, that when you first look at her you half fancy her face is all eyes. Then after a while you notice that there is a bit of a nose as well; a little mouth, with thin lips very closely pressed together; a little white forehead, with two big wrinkles

across it; and, half-hidden in the sofa-cushions, you see some soft brown hair, brushed off her brow, and neatly braided behind. But, most of all, you must notice something that it is very, very sad to see in little children's faces—that is, *pain*.

There is some one else in the room beside the little girl on the sofa. It is a tall, handsome man; and he is so like the little girl, that you can tell at once they are father and daughter.

He is busily engaged in packing some lovely water-colour sketches in boxes—almost as carefully and lovingly as if they were his children too.

'Father,' says the little girl, turning her big eyes towards him languidly, 'how much longer shall we be here now? I do want the cool, nice country, father! It is *so* hot here—everything seems to burn.'

'My poor little Bab!' says the father; and he stops in his work to look sorrowfully at her. It is such a grief to him to see *pain* in that little face. 'I'm afraid it won't be for a few days yet. There is a good deal to be

done in the old house, Bab, before it will be ready for us. Is it so *very* hard to be patient, my own darling ?'

'The pain is bad, father, and will not let me rest. It burns like a fire all up and down my back! Talk to me, father, and I will try not to think about it.'

'What shall I talk to you about, Bab ? You would like to hear about the new home, wouldn't you ?'

'Please, father dear. The country sounds so nice and cool to talk about !'

'Well then, little maiden, you will think the Grange just *the* most delightful place you ever were in when you see it. There are no end of rooms and passages, Bab. When we get there, if you are not too tired, I will carry you about through them all, and you shall choose the one you like best for your own little bedroom. There is one where you have only to open the window, and you can put out your hand, and gather basketfuls of sweet white roses and jessamine that grow all up the front of the house. We will deck up your room just as you please, little maiden—

any amount of white muslin, and pink ribbons, and bits of finery. You shall have a bonnie canary in the window, and your own beloved pussy on the softest of soft rugs; only you'll have to give her very strict orders about keeping her paws off the bird. And the garden, Bab, there is always shade under some of the big trees; and flowers, flowers everywhere—like weeds almost. I will wheel your chair, when it is fine and warm, down the garden paths to the beautiful river. It flows right past the garden, and there is always a deliciously fresh breeze blowing there. Water-lilies and flowering rushes grow near the bank, and on it are lovely green ferns which dip their stems into the water, and are never anything but green and fresh. Just above, there is a charming little summer-house, where you can rest, and be nicely shaded.

'But you will love the forest best, Bab—Sherwood Forest, with its splendid giant oaks and beeches, its graceful birches, and dark pines. It is like a fairy world, Bab! Under-foot the carpet is of the softest green moss,

ferns, foxgloves, and heather. Overhead the big boughs sing, and the tiny ones whisper together; and the blue sky tries hard to peep in, and see what is going on. There are deer in the forest—big red deer, who quarrel savagely amongst each other, and gentle little fallow deer, who bound away out of sight directly they hear the faintest footstep. There are screaming pheasants in the bracken, and wood-pigeons coo mournfully from the tall pines, and blue jays mimic all the voices of the birds.

'I shall paint wonderful pictures there, Bab; and you will watch me painting, and find me the loveliest spots. How you will revel in it all, my darling! But, best of all, Bab, I hope to see this little pale face grow rosy, and these thin cheeks get round and plump in the fresh country air, and among all the beautiful things. Oh, my Bab! what wouldn't I give to have you strong and healthy like other children!'

'Go on, father, please,' says Bab in a contented tone; 'it's very nice! Who lived in the Grange before you took it, father?'

'A widow lady, I fancy,' answers her father. 'She died a little while ago.'

'I'm sorry,' says Bab. 'I hope she hadn't any little children. It would be so sad for them to have nobody left.'

'I did not hear whether or no she had any children,' the father answers. 'I only saw my friend Smith for a moment; he was just going to attend an urgent case, so I could not hear much. Besides, he wanted to know all about my little maiden, you know, Bab!'

Bab doesn't speak. Her big eyes are closed, and her father fancies she has fallen asleep. But Bab is not asleep; she is only thinking. Presently she says:

'Father!'

'Yes, darling.'

'Won't the lady see mother now? I wish we had known before she died, and then I could have sent a message to mother. I could have told her how Jesus helps me to bear all the pain without being cross and saying naughty things to Lotty; and how the dear picture you gave me of our Blessed Mother looks down on me, and helps me too; couldn't

I, father? and then she would have been so glad!'

'Dear little Bab,' says the father tenderly, 'won't it be enough if Jesus and His dear Mother know, and thy own Guardian Angel?'

And Bab answers:

'Yes.'

CHAPTER VII.

ABOUT LITTLE POLLY AND BOBBIE'S LESSONS.

'Poor little one, with the thin, pale cheeks,
Whence poverty's tale most loudly speaks,
In hollows and wrinkles, and such-like freaks,
And tells of want and woe.'

JUST at the back of Floral Cottage—that is to say, just outside the garden-fence—stands a miserable hovel, whose crooked walls are built of mud and lathes plastered together. The low roof is thatched, and from under it peep out two poor little windows, small enough to begin with, but made smaller still by the sheets of brown paper that fill half the panes instead of glass.

The space of ground round the hovel is

beaten hard and bare by the tramp of constantly passing feet, so that not even stunted grass can grow there.

This is little Polly Dacre's home; and here little Polly spends the long, dreary days, while her mother, big Polly, is out charing for the neighbours.

Bobbie and Birdie pity little Polly and her miserable life heartily.

Polly is younger than they are by a couple of years; but she is one of those luckless children who are *born grown-up.* She has never learnt to play; and, though she cannot speak plain yet, her talk is that of a very old woman.

Perhaps it is this fact of her utterly unchildlike character that has inspired Bobbie and Birdie with the idea of adopting her as their baby, so that she may have a chance of beginning life again in a sensible manner. Anyway, it is with this object in view that the two children betake themselves to the far end of the garden one morning — laden with biscuits, breakfast-leavings and savings—to entice little Polly Dacre into the garden.

There, sure enough, is little Polly at the window, with her nose flattened pancake-wise against one of the glass-panes.

Bobbie arranges a few biscuits along the top of the palings, and then they both watch Polly intently to see what she will do. It is a very anxious moment.

Polly's dull, heavy eyes gradually fasten themselves upon the dainties; an eager, hawk-like twinkle grows in them; then her nose slowly withdraws from the window, and in a very short time she has made her appearance outside the hovel, and close to the garden-fence. She would make a pounce upon the biscuits, and run off with them, if the children were not there; but Bobbie and Birdie's eyes are fixed on her, and she dare not.

'Did yer mean 'em for me?' she asks at last.

'They're all—every one of them—for you, Polly,' says Bobbie coaxingly, 'if you'll come in here, *dear* little Polly! You'd like to, wouldn't you, Polly? 'cos we've got *lots* more inside.'

'Well, I b'lieve I've a mind to,' lisps Polly.

She has only had a stale crust of bread for her breakfast this morning, and the biscuits look very tempting.

'That's right, *dear* little Polly!' answers Bobbie eagerly; and he opens the garden-gate.

Polly advances towards him very slowly, with her finger in the corner of her mouth—very much as a mouse would approach cheese that suggested the possibility of *trap* too.

'Come in, Polly,' says Bobbie encouragingly, holding the gate wide open; and Polly makes a wild rush in, like a frightened sheep.

Birdie fills her pinafore with biscuits and scraps, and sets her down on the grass to munch.

Bobbie carefully closes the garden-gate, draws the bolt, and takes Birdie aside for a consultation as to what is to be done next.

'She's *very* dirty, Bobbie,' says Birdie. 'Do you know I think we'd better let her go again, after all.'

'Oh no!' says Bobbie decidedly; 'we can't do that. We will wash her when she is not quite so frightened, under the pump.'

'Do you think she *will* wash?' inquires Birdie doubtfully, much as if little Polly were some article of apparel whose washing capabilities are very doubtful.

'Anyhow, Polly is *our sister*, Birdie,' says Bobbie; 'our "*dear* sister,"' quoting Father Earle; 'and so we *must* be kind to her, don't you see?'

'But I thought we wanted her for our child?' puts in Birdie.

'Of course; but that's *besides*,' answers Bobbie. 'You'll be her mamma, and I'll be her papa. She'll forget all about her *old* mother in time.'

'But big Polly won't forget about *her*,' says Birdie doubtfully. 'Won't she be wanting her back again?'

'I don't believe she'll care very much,' answers Bobbie. 'If she *does* come, I dare say she'll take my new "Babes in the Wood" book in exchange for her; and *I*'d rather have little Polly of the two.'

'We won't call her "Polly" any longer, says Birdie. 'I dare say *she*'s tired of being called so. What shall her new name be, Bobbie?'

'Well,' Bobbie replies thoughtfully, '*I* think *Samuel's* a very nice name; or *Abraham*, Birdie. Oh yes; let's call her *Abraham!*'

Birdie nods assent.

'And where shall we keep Abraham?' she asks. 'Nurse Nelly won't have her indoors until she's washed, I'm sure, Bobbie.'

'Won't the old hen-house do?' says Bobbie, looking round him. 'I can't think of anywhere else.'

'Well, it *would*,' says Birdie; 'for there are no fowls there now. Only there's no bed for her to sleep in there.'

'*She'll have to roost then*,' says Bobbie decidedly; 'the hens do.'

Meanwhile little Polly has munched up her biscuits, and now sits on the grass looking about her with a satisfied grin on her face.

Bobbie and Birdie come and seat themselves before her, but at a little distance, and enter at once upon a course of necessary parental instruction.

'You're not Polly any longer now,' remarks Bobbie. 'Your name is to be Abraham now.'

'It bean't,' grins Polly. 'That were grandfather's name afore they put him i' the'r 'ole.'

'Birdie and I are your papa and mamma now,' continues Bobbie, taking no notice of Polly's little speech.

'Be yer?' says Polly stolidly. 'An' whathiver's *that?*'

'It's—it's—' stammers Bobbie—'a mamma is—a papa is—something very nice anyhow, Pol—Abraham.'

'Master Bobbie! Miss Birdie!'

It is Nurse Nelly's voice.

'It's dinner, Bobbie,' says Birdie. 'What shall we do with—Abraham?'

'I'll stop,' says Polly, answering for herself. 'It's nice't here.'

'But you'll want your dinner, Polly; and how are you to get it?' asks Birdie.

'There ain't none. I've *h*eat it all fur break'us',' says Polly.

'Birdie and me'll save you some of ours, if you'll stop till we come,' says Bobbie.

'*Papa*'ll bring you some dinner, Abraham.'

Polly grins, and the hawk-like expression comes into her eyes once more.

'Master Bobbie! Miss Birdie!' calls Nurse Nelly's voice down the garden again, rather impatiently this time, and the children run up to the cottage.

Alas for poor Bobbie and the dinner he saves so cleverly for 'child Abraham!' When dinner is over, Nurse Nelly declares that for an hour at least the sun will be far too hot for the children to play in the garden that afternoon, and proposes a reading lesson instead.

Bobbie groans aloud with vexation of spirit, and Birdie whispers to him that the rice-pudding in her pocket-handkerchief 'is dripping—just a very little.' But there is no help for it; so stifling their feelings of natural parental anxiety, both children reach down their books from the shelf and seat themselves reluctantly one on each side of Nurse Nelly.

Fortunately Nelly's stock-in-hand of patience is a considerable one, for it is to be tried to the uttermost this afternoon.

To add to the list of the children's misfortunes, it happens that the story to be read to-day is all about the troubles of a certain Polly; and poor Bobbie blunders through it,

his thoughts out in the garden with the dinnerless Polly waiting there. Once or twice, indeed, he even substitutes 'Abraham' for 'Polly' as he reads, which draws upon him a mild reproof on the score of inattention from Nurse Nelly.

'O-r-a-n-ge—*h*orange,' says Nurse Nelly, as Bobbie spells the word slowly over.

''Tisn't,' is Bobbie's not over-polite rejoinder. 'There isn't an "h".'

'And did I say there was a "haitch," Master Robert? Didn't I say *horange* plain enough?' asks Nurse Nelly, waxing slightly irate, and laying more stress than ever on the unfortunate letter in question.

'You didn't say it right, Nelly,' persists Bobbie. 'Nelly, how do you like the name of Abraham?'

'Please to go on with your lessin, Master Bobbie,' says Nellie; 'and I'll see about answering questions afterwards.'

So they go drearily on, until at last the lesson comes to an end; the afternoon is grown cooler, and both children dart off into the garden.

But where is 'Abraham'? She has disappeared bodily. Not through the gate, that is certain, for it is still shut and bolted just as Bobbie left it. Not over the fencing, for she is not tall enough to climb it. Where then is she?

Bobbie and Birdie hunt up and down the little garden, growing hot and tired in their search, until at last they come upon their adopted child snugly hidden away under the gooseberry-bushes, picking and eating as fast as fingers and teeth can ply.

'Oh, whatever will Nurse Nelly say!' cries Bobbie, wrathfully tugging the culprit out of the bushes by her frock, in spite of active resistance on Polly's part. She has no mind to leave the cool, green fruit she so rarely gets a chance of tasting.

'What can you 'spect of children, Bobbie?' says Birdie, quoting Nurse Nelly's words so often spoken with reference to herself and Bobbie.

Little Polly is now safely conducted back to the grass under the palings, and the rice-pudding produced from Birdie's pocket in a

decidedly 'dripping' condition; from Bobbie's issue various other oddments, on which little Polly is regaled.

'Abraham,' says Bobbie, when Polly has disposed of all the eatables satisfactorily, 'you are going to roost in the hen-house to-night. You won't be afraid, you know, because it's quite light all night long now. We shall come and see you first thing next morning.'

Polly stares with her mouth open, but says nothing. She has not the faintest idea of what Bobbie is trying to impress upon her.

'Perhaps you'd better show her how to roost, Bobbie; I shouldn't think she knows,' remarks Birdie.

'Well, perhaps I had;' and Bobbie draws unresisting Polly into the hen-house, mounts the poles that cross it, and, after trying various positions, seats himself astride one.

'It's rather *hard*,' he admits, descending again; 'but I don't think we can make it comfortabler. Anyhow, if Abraham *does* go to sleep here, she won't have very far to tumble.'

All this time little Polly has been staring stolidly before her—seeing nothing, hearing nothing, caring nothing—and when at length she *does* turn round, look about her, and listen —Bobbie and Birdie have vanished.

Little Polly tries to open the hen-house door, but find it latched from the outside. Then she perches herself on one of the roosting-poles, and waits to see what will happen next.

How long she sits there! and still nobody comes; at least, nobody except the pale, clear, round moon, that peeps down at her from the sky.

The night air grows sharp and chill. Little Bobbie and Birdie have had their noses snugly between the blankets for some time past. They are dreaming pleasant dreams by now, in which the poor, cold, shivering Abraham outside plays a prominent part.

Nine o'clock has struck on the kitchen clock, and died away. Suddenly an awful shriek rings through the garden—then another, and another!

Nurse Nelly looks up from her needlework

at the first, stands on her feet at the second, and at the third rushes out into the garden, and down to the hen-house, whence the cries seemed to proceed. There to her horror she sees a little white-faced figure, grim and ghastly in the moonlight, clinging with small hands to the wire-fencing; and from Polly's wide-open mouth these awful screams are issuing.

Nelly speedily opens the hen-house door, and sets the unhappy little captive free. Then she carries her to her own home, where Big Polly has just arrived, after a long day's charing at some distance, greatly alarmed to find Little Polly missing, and greatly delighted to have her safe at home again.

Well, there is only the result of this misadventure next morning left me to tell you.

Bobbie and Birdie find to their great sorrow that adopted children are complete failures, and they wisely resolve to give up the idea for the future.

'Only—when I have childrem of *my own*,' says Bobbie, 'I shall call them *all* "Abraham"!'

CHAPTER VIII.

NURSE NELLY'S TROUBLES ABOUT 'EDDICATION.'

'Pray, in thy daily distresses;
Pray, in thy trouble and care;
Surely He answers and blesses
The lowliest whisper of prayer.'

Hot tears fall upon Nurse Nelly's work as she sits sewing in the kitchen one evening, after the children have gone to bed and the house is quiet. Something is troubling her very much.

It is this. Nurse Nelly is beginning to feel, after several fruitless struggles with Bobbie and Birdie's lessons, that she is 'no scholard,' as she terms it. Bobbie has half proved to her that she doesn't even know how to read correctly; and as for grammar and French, they are as far above her head as the stars are above this green world of ours!

What is to be done? The children *must* be taught, Nurse Nelly has made up her mind to *that*; the only question is—How?

'They shan't go to that there Board school,' say Nurse Nelly's thoughts; 'learnin' words

to see who it is, and sees a young girl with a very sweet, loving face bending over him.

'Sister Marion, I guess!' says Bobbie.

'Brother Bobbie, I guess!' replies the girl, laughing very merrily. Then she folds Birdie in her arms, and the kissing process is repeated.

'Now you must come in and see mamma,' says Marion. 'She has put on her best cap to do honour to the young gentleman in the "lady-bird suit." Nurse will find her way to the housekeeper's room with baby, where Mrs. Hollins will make her very comfortable.'

And Marion, taking the children's hands, dances into the drawing-room with them, and up to a dear little old lady who sits knitting away in a crimson arm-chair with the white hair and dainty queen-like face that Bobbie admires so much. She puts down her work now, and takes both children into her arms, kissing them warmly.

Bobbie's attention having been drawn to Mrs. Earle's head-dress, put on in his honour, he feels himself bound in common politeness to make some remark upon it suitable to the occasion. So, after standing before her for a

few moments, thoughtfully inspecting it, he says gravely:

'Yes, I should have known that was your best one without being told, Mrs. Earle. You look beautifuller than ever in it!'

Then Marion makes a rush at him, and declares that 'he will make mamma quite conceited, and that will never do!'

Bobbie and Birdie take possession of two small chairs, one on each side of the old lady, into which they fit so literally, that when Bobbie gets up he carries his chair with him, like a snail her house!

Then they both watch preparations being made for tea, with evident interest and satisfaction, to judge by the remarks they make upon the subject.

'Ah, I'm glad to see cakes!' remarks Bobbie, with the air of an epicure.

'Bobbie hasn't had any cakes since Anne went away,' explains Birdie. 'I'm glad, too!'

'Hurrah!—jam!' cries Bobbie. 'I'm *so* tired of having only bread-and-butter!'

'Bobbie's very fond of jam, you know,' explains Birdie; 'and so am I.'

'What's that *de*licious-looking stuff in the dish she's bringing in?' exclaims Bobbie excitedly. 'Strawberries-and-cream? Oh, I say!'

'We never have anything nice at home now,' says Birdie. 'Nurse Nelly is always talking about "things costing money." Why, we only had broth and rice-pudding for dinner to-day!'

'And Nurse Nelly didn't even have *that*,' adds Bobbie. 'She put all the broth on our plates, and she only had bread-and-cheese left for herself.'

'What a good, kind Nurse Nelly she must be, Bobbie!' says Mrs. Earle.

'Yes,' says Bobbie; 'she is—very! But she's *terribly* provoking sometimes!' he adds, with something of a sigh.

'When is that?' asks Marion, helping Bobbie to a plateful of strawberries-and-cream.

'Well, it isn't *her* fault, poor thing!' says Bobbie, with his mouth full of the sweet fruit. 'But you see, sister Marion, Nelly's no "scholard," and when she tries to take our lessons, she can't get on a bit. She puts in

her "h's" and leaves them out just where she oughtn't; and she's never even heard of "Je suis, tu est, il est." She cries about it sometimes, and makes her eyes red.'

'Poor Nurse Nelly!' says Mrs. Earle. 'And you call her provoking because she has not learnt French, do you, Bobbie?'

'It isn't only that, Mrs. Earle,' says Bobbie; 'but she can't answer any questions we ask her about anything, except Baby Hetty. And there's nobody to ask except her now!'

'What questions do you want to ask, little boy?' says Father Earle kindly. He has come in for a little rest with his sister, after a long, tiring day's work.

'Oh, a great many,' says Bobbie eagerly. 'For one thing, Birdie and me want so much to know why Jesus took away Aunt Hester, when Birdie and me had asked Him so often to make her well again?'

Bobbie waits for an answer, with his big eyes, grave and earnest now, fixed on Father Earle's face.

'Little boy,' says the old priest very tenderly, 'when you asked our Blessed Lord to

make Aunt Hester well, didn't you want Him to do it *in the best way*—His own way?'

'I didn't know there *were* more ways than one,' answers Bobbie; 'and so that would be the best.'

'God has many ways of answering our prayers, my child,' says the old priest softly. 'We can't always see or know about them, that's all; and so we have to trust Him for them. He has answered *your* prayer in the *best* way, Bobbie. He has taken Aunt Hester to be with Him; He *has* made her *quite well for ever*, my child.'

'I see!' says Bobbie, nodding his head, with a bright intelligent look in those earnest eyes of his. 'Jesus *did* listen, you see, Birdie.'

While Father Earle has been answering little Bobbie's question, Marion has slipped down on to a stool by her mother's side, and they are talking together in low voices, with frequent glances at the children.

'I know I can manage to spare the time, mother,' Bobbie hears Marion say. 'May I try?'

'By all means, love,' her mother answers; 'if the nurse is willing.'

'I will go and see.'

Marion slips out of the room, but soon returns with Baby Hetty laughing and crowing in her arms, and a very triumphant look on her face.

'Nurse Nelly is only too glad, mother,' she says joyfully. 'Now, Brother Bobbie and Sister Birdie, what do you say to Sister Marion as governess? I don't profess to be a "scholard," Bobbie; but I think we can manage "Je suis, tu es, il est." Nurse Nelly promises to let you come to me for lessons every morning, so long as it doesn't rain cats and dogs! What do you say?'

'*I* say it's jolly!' cries Bobbie, delighted.

'*I*'m very glad!' says Birdie, clasping her hands.

And so Nurse Nelly's prayer finds an answer, and her troubles with regard to the children's 'eddication' sink for ever into the bottom of the sea. No visions of importunate School Board ''spectres' any longer haunt her dreams by night, nor does the sense of her own '*igg*erance' trouble her during the day.

CHAPTER IX.

BIG POLLY.

'Two little bright-eyed children,
With their hearts of love and glee,
Come as ministering Angels
To the home of poverty.'

'I'M clemm'd, I am—right clemm'd!—and mother's clemm'd too! We ain't had nuffink sin' t'other mornin'. Bean't there no more o' them biscuits, think ye?'

Bobbie and Birdie are shelling peas under the shade of the garden-palings; but they both turn round on hearing the voice, and there stands little Polly on the other side of the fence, peering at them through a chink.

The two children stare at her for a little while, as though she were a being from another world; her face is so drawn and thin, and her eyes seem to stand half out of her head, with oh, such a strange wild glare in them.

Little Polly repeats her words more plaintively than ever.

'I'm nigh clemm'd to death,' she whines. 'Ain't yer got *nuffink* to eat?'

'Fancy not having anything to eat, Bobbie!' says Birdie, her blue eyes full of compassionate tears. 'What can we do for little Polly? Nelly is gone to the shop with Baby Hetty, and the house-door is locked. How can we get her something to eat?'

'*I* know,' says Bobbie. 'I'll climb in through the kitchen window, and get some bread for her;' and Bobbie is off like a shot.

'Why haven't you had anything to eat, Polly?' asks Birdie. 'Hasn't your mother any money left to buy things?'

A frightened look comes into little Polly's white face as Birdie speaks of her mother; and she answers slowly:

'Mother's nowhere—leastways she thinks she's everywhere—and she don't know nuffink. An' she don't speak, 'cept about what she don't know—all of a heap like! An' she's kickin' out dreffful, so as I dursn't go nigh her!' and Polly ends with sobs and tears.

Birdie, too, looks very troubled.

'Your mother must be dreadfully ill—or

something bad,' she says. 'I'll ask Bobbie what we'd better do when he comes back. Bobbie knows more than anybody else, I think. Don't you cry any more, little Polly.'

Bobbie soon appears with a great hunch of bread, which Polly clutches at eagerly, and begins to devour at once. Meanwhile Birdie tells him all she can gather from little Polly's incoherent words, of big Polly's condition.

'Yes; she's ill, no doubt!' is Bobbie's prompt rejoinder. 'We'll go and see her, poor thing! You'll not be afraid of her kicking if *I*'m there—will you, Birdie?'

'No—o,' says Birdie, just a little doubtfully.

'She were up wi' her fis'ses at me, she were!' says Polly, with her mouth full. 'An' her face is all red and sco'tched like. An' she's for ever speakin' *that loud*, she is.'

'Come along, Birdie. Let's go before we get too frightened,' says Bobbie courageously; and Birdie puts her hand in his with a pale but resolute face.

Bobbie opens the gate, and they are fairly outside now.

'Don't be afraid,' he whispers to Birdie.

'You know Jesus 'd never let us be kicked, would He?'

'No,' says Birdie; 'I'm not *very* much frightened now, Bobbie.'

The cottage door stands wide open, and they enter the miserable little kitchen. Polly follows, still gnawing at her hunch of bread.

They can hear a voice speaking very fast upstairs, in a high, unnatural key, now and then rising to a shrill scream.

Bobbie leads Birdie up the broken ladder which does duty for a staircase, and little Polly creeps up after them.

At the top the children find themselves in a long, low chamber, with a sloping roof, dimly lighted by one small window. The plaster floor is all uncarpeted, and in places where it has fallen through there is quite a good view of the room below. A broken chair, an old table, and a mattress in one corner, are the only furniture of that miserable room.

On the mattress, beneath a ragged coverlet, lies a worn and wasted woman, with flushed face and rolling eyes, speaking loud and rapidly, and now and then waving her arms

violently to and fro in the air. This is big Polly—little Polly's mother.

'Now—ain't you scared?' whispers little Polly, who stands behind the children, ready to bolt at once should her mother recommence kicking operations.

'My!' cries the sick woman, staring hard at the ceiling. 'They're all mussed ag'in—every one on 'em! I'll have 'em all to wash ag'in over-night; an' how'll I ever get home to my Polly? ... Eh, dear! they're creepin', an' crawlin', an' scrapin' all over my bed! The rats! Catch 'em—catch 'em! Oh, that gre't black un! its tail's settin' the chimbley a-fire, an' the bed's burnin'! ... Its tail! Didn't yer see it all a-blazin'? Polly, child, your frock'll catch next, an' it's your only one! ... Eh, I *can't* wash 'em out, Mrs. Clark; I couldn't if it was ever so. It ain't kind in you to axe me. If yer did but know how bad my head do ache ye wouldn't axe me! ... Fetch water, Polly!—water! Put the fire out! It's creepin' along, an' it'll burn me alive i' the bed! ... Water! water! water!'

Then she turns over on the mattress with

her face toward the children, and stares at them with eyes that see nothing. How parched and dry are her lips! How burning with fever-heat her face!

'Fetch some water, Polly,' whispers Birdie. 'Quick!'

'I bean't a-goin' nigh her,' says Polly doggedly; 'I bean't agoin' to hev' her a-kickin' an' scrattin' on me ag'in, I tell yer!'

'You needn't,' says Bobbie. 'Only fetch it, or she will die!'

Polly scampers off down the ladder, and soon returns with a broken pitcher full of water, which she gives into Bobbie's hands.

Bobbie stoops down by the side of the mattress, and with trembling fingers—for he feels very much frightened, though he would not own it—puts it to the sick woman's lips.

Eagerly she drinks, and the poor, parched mouth grows cool and moist. When Bobbie takes away the jug, her eyes have almost lost their wild look, and she fixes them on him, speaking quite naturally.

'You're the only one as is kind to poor Polly,' she says. 'I believe I'd have died but

for that blessed water. May Heaven above reward you for it, little gentleman!'

'I don't know about that,' says Bobbie, puzzled; 'it was *your own water*, you know, and your Polly fetched it. Birdie and me are glad you're better.'

'If you'd only see for the doctor!' moans big Polly. 'I'd send little Polly, only she'd be safe not to find him. I can't tell what's come to me; I'm all in pain—burning!'

'Go, Bobbie,' says little Birdie bravely; 'and I'll stay. I'm not a bit afraid now.'

'You wouldn't like to kick my Birdie, or frighten her, big Polly, would you?' asks Bobbie, as he disappears down the crazy ladder.

'No, no,' moans the sick woman; 'I ain't wild now. Only go quick, and bring the doctor!'

'Wouldn't you like something to eat?' asks Birdie, gathering courage, and coming round to the sick woman's bedside; 'Little Polly said you were "clemm'd."'

'I ain't tasted a crust o' bread of a long while,' murmurs big Polly. 'Perhaps I could manage to swallow a bit.'

Birdie takes the bread from little Polly's reluctant hands, and feeds the sick woman with small broken pieces; but she can only take a few mouthfuls.

'I'm *so* sorry for you!' says tender-hearted little Birdie; 'but you know, if it is right for you, Jesus will make you well soon. It wasn't right for my mamma, though,' she adds with a sigh.

'Who is Jesus, little lady?' asks the sick woman. 'I ain't got no friends of my own—none in all the world as I knows of!'

'Jesus Christ is the dear Son of God,' answers Birdie reverently; 'and didn't you know that He is your friend, too? How funny! Well, He *is;* and He's sent Bobbie and me to help you to-day, and He'll send Mr. Smith soon. Didn't you know that? And you've only got to tell Him just all you want, and He'll do it for you. I wonder you didn't ask Him to help you not to kick this morning! you frightened little Polly ever so!'

'You ask Him to make me better, and to see to my little Polly while I am,' murmurs the sick woman, clasping her hands.

Birdie hesitates not a moment. Kneeling down by the miserable mattress, her tiny hands make the sign of the cross, and she prays in her own simple child-language: 'Please, dear Jesus up in heaven, big Polly wants me to ask You to make her better, if You think it's the best thing (she's forgotten to ask You before). And please take care of her little Polly until she's well enough to take care of her herself, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

'Thank ye, little lady; thank ye,' whispers big Polly, and Birdie is astonished to see the tears rolling down her poor, thin cheeks.

'Don't cry,' says little Birdie, in great distress; 'I didn't mean to make you cry.'

'It isn't you,' sobs big Polly. 'It's all along o' Him sendin' you to help me when I was like to die—without me so much as thinkin' to ask Him! And I reckon He'll have to take care o' me and my little Polly pretty well as long as we both lives. We ain't got no other Friend, we ain't! I was a Catholic once, and could say a prayer like you, missie, then; but I was no but little, and I forgot all about religion now.'

'But you'll begin to remember about it now, won't you?' says little Birdie. 'When you get well, you'll go to Mass, and take little Polly, won't you?'

Before big Polly can reply, the door of the attic opens, and Mr. Smith, ushered in by Bobbie, enters the miserable room. His first glance at big Polly's face shows him that she is in a burning fever. He bids the children run home at once; adding, 'Tell Nurse Nelly where you've been, and that the woman has a fever. You have run great risk in coming here, but you have probably been the means of saving this poor creature's life. Tell Nurse, too, that I will look in on her presently.'

Bobby and Birdie obey, and repeat Mr. Smith's message to Nurse Nelly, who has returned from the shop, word for word. Nurse Nelly's face grows very pale as she listens. She does not even scold the children for having ventured beyond the garden during her absence; she only sinks down on a chair and covers her face with her hands.

'The Lord above only knows what is to become of us!' she groans. 'You're safe to

take the fever, both of you, let alone baby—and she just in trouble with teething! Whatever *shall* I do? Whatever *shall* I do?'

And poor Nurse Nelly's heart is very heavy that day, and for many a day to come.

CHAPTER X.

BABY HETTY.

'She took the cup of life to sip,
Too bitter 'twas to drain;
She meekly put it from her lip,
And went to sleep again.'

BIRDIE awakes one morning, feeling *very* hot, *very* cross, *very* thirsty, and *very* miserable! All through the night, though she does not know it, Nurse Nelly has been by her bedside, watching her little flushed face and restless tossing in her sleep, with an anxious heart. Little Birdie has got the fever.

Nurse Nelly gives her a sweet, soothing drink, smooths the hot bedclothes about her, and cheers her up with some bright words.

Bobbie's cot no longer stands in its place

beside Birdie's. It has been moved away into another room, so that Bobbie may escape the fever if possible. Only Baby Hetty's cradle is there still; and in it lies Baby Hetty, wailing piteously, for she has caught the dreadful fever as well as Birdie.

Poor Birdie's head is aching very badly. Sometimes it gives a great jump of pain, and Birdie cries quietly to herself with it. There is a fire burning within it, and she tosses over and over in bed, while Nurse Nelly stands by, patiently straightening the coverlets every time, and soothing her with words almost as loving and gentle as those her own mother might have spoken.

Like a little restless spirit, Bobbie flits up and down the passage outside. He is very unhappy without his Birdie, and does not know what to do.

Presently Nurse Nelly comes out of Birdie's room, and tells him to run as fast as he can and fetch Mr. Smith.

Bobbie goes at once. But before Mr. Smith arrives, Birdie has fallen asleep.

Only Baby Hetty keeps up that pitiful wail;

and Nurse Nelly carries her up and down the room in her arms, singing a soft lullaby.

Ah! if Baby Hetty could get to sleep and forget her pain!

But no! those heavy eyelids will not close, and the sad little wail continues.

By-and-by Nurse Nelly hears the doctor's step on the stairs. She cannot leave Baby Hetty to go to him; but he finds his way upstairs, and enters the room at last.

Bobbie is not with him, and great fears at once fill poor anxious Nurse Nelly's mind about him.

'Master Bobbie—Master Bobbie! Where is he, sir? He hasn't fallen ill, has he—that you've left him behind?' questions Nurse Nelly.

'He is in excellent hands (my Mrs. Cuddles, Nelly!), and in capital health and spirits. She made me promise to leave him with her; and so, if you'll kindly make me up a bundle of the clothing he requires, I should like to keep him until we get this illness out of the house. You have more than enough to occupy you now, and my Mrs. Cuddles is delighted to have a child to see to once more!'

Nurse Nelly sees the truth of the doctor's words, and she consents to let Bobbie stay under Mrs. Cuddles' care for a while.

'You don't think baby's took the fever *very* bad, do you, sir?' she asks, watching with a heavy heart the anxious look that steals over the doctor's face as he bends over the wailing child in her arms; 'not *very* bad with it, is she?'

'Baby has taken the fever badly, I fear,' Mr. Smith answers gravely; 'but, with God's help, we will bring her through. Most constant care and incessant watching she will need for the next few days. Fortunately little Birdie has taken it only slightly.'

'The little dear baby!' says Nurse Nelly half to herself; 'often and often I've noticed a look on its face of heaven, like as if she wasn't meant long for this world! She's such a delicate little thing, sir, and has been from her birth. She never was so strong as the other two.'

'Courage, Nelly; courage!' says the doctor cheerfully.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Bobbie is sitting perched up on the broad window-seat of the doctor's consulting room, and in an arm-chair by his side is Mrs. Cuddles, a stout old lady, with a face quite full to overflowing of smiles and good-nature.

There has been perfect silence for some considerable time between the two. Mrs. Cuddles is counting over in her mind the number of years since there has been a small boy in the house before Bobbie (excepting, of course, those little boys who have been sent by their parents for the doctor, or the doctor's physic); and Bobbie is trying to think of something to talk about. The young gentleman is not partial to golden silence.

Presently a bright idea occurs to him.

'Mrs. Cuddles!' he begins.

'Yes, my dearie!'

'You make cakes here sometimes, don't you? *Do* you think we might have some for tea?—not seeds, please!'

'Ay, my dear—that you shall!' answers the old housekeeper; 'and anything else as you desire, lovey!'

'*You* don't mind about things "costing money," do you?' asks Bobbie. 'Nurse Nelly does; she's always talking about it.'

'Well, no—I don't suppose I do—not a very deal,' replies Mrs. Cuddles thoughtfully. 'But then it isn't *my* money as goes for the cakes, Master Bobbie, and that makes a difference.'

'Of course!' assents Bobbie, his respect for Mrs. Cuddles and the cakes increasing every moment.

'Do you know, my dear,' says the old housekeeper, 'now I come to think, it's six year, this blessed day, since ever a little lad like you has trod these floors. To think o' that! An' me, too—as loves to hear their merry voices, and the patter of their little feet, bless 'em!'

'Six years is a long time, isn't it?' remarks Bobbie thoughtfully. 'I suppose that last little boy'll be about grown up by now, won't he—perhaps as old as Mr. Smith?—Mrs. Cuddles!'

'Well, lovey, what is it?'

'Isn't Mr. Smith old enough for a wife yet?'

'Well, yes, my dear; I should say so,' answers Mrs. Cuddles, smiling.

'Then why doesn't he get one?' inquires Bobbie. 'Hasn't anybody asked him yet?'

'Well, my dear,' says Mrs. Cuddles, greatly amused, 'seeing you're so anxious he should marry, you'd better find a wife for him.'

'Well, I will!' and Bobbie turns over in his mind the list of his eligible lady acquaintances. 'I should have liked Mrs. Earle for him best,' he says at last. 'But then, you see, Captain Earle's got *her* when he's at home; and she's p'r'aps a little old, isn't she? Then there's Marion—only I *rather* wanted her myself when I've grown big enough; but I'll give her up to him if he likes. Or Nurse Nelly — only he'd have to wait till Baby Hetty's got old enough to do without her. Or he might have big Polly. She *is* rather ugly, to be sure; but it 'ud be a *very* good thing for her and little Polly! Oh, Mrs. Cuddles! *do* just get up a moment and look at that beautiful carriage with the brown horses in it, and the man, and that pretty

little girl with blue ribbons in her hat! Do you know who it is?'

'I fancy it's the new gentleman that's taken the Grange, my dear,' says Mrs. Cuddles, when the carriage has passed out of sight; 'and her with the blue ribbons'll be his little girl. I've heard the master say as he's a great artist-painter, as draws pictures for the love of 'em, 'cause he's got no end o' money. He's got some of his fine pictures in th' Academy (and depend upon it, *that's* somewhere grand, by the way master spoke it; I wouldn't go for to say that it isn't in furrin lands, myself). He's coming into these parts with the purpose of taking some likenesses of the trees in the forest. Folks thinks a deal of our forest, Master Bobbie!'

'Of course!' says Bobbie proudly. 'Is your Mr. Smith a great friend of his?'

'Well, not to say a *great* friend, I should say,' answers Mrs. Cuddles; 'Mr. Gardiner (that's the new gentleman at the Grange) picked up an acquaintance somewhere in one o' them London hospitals with our doctor, it's my belief.'

'I should like to get to know that little girl,' says Bobbie. 'I like her hat with the blue ribbons very much! My Birdie has black ribbons on hers, and it's not *nearly* so pretty. When will Birdie be well again, Mrs. Cuddles?'

'Soon, I hope, Master Bobbie—if it please God.'

'Oh, Mrs. Cuddles!' says Bobbie, in a very troubled voice; 'I've *quite* forgotten to tell Him that she's ill. I ought to have asked Him about making her well *long ago!*'

'Never mind, my dearie!' comforts Mrs. Cuddles; 'He knows all about it. He knows all we want afore ever we put it in words. The Lord'll make little Miss Birdie well very soon; don't you fret!'

'I'm not,' says Bobbie. 'But please, Mrs. Cuddles, if you wouldn't mind showing me the little room with the pink bed you said I'm to have while I'm here, I think I'll just go and tell Jesus about my Birdie. Even if He *does* know, He'll like to hear all about it from me. And I can't tell Him down here, because I keep thinking about all the people and horses that pass.'

'Well, you are a queer little lad, if ever there was one!' exclaims Mrs. Cuddles; but she puts down her knitting, and takes Bobbie upstairs into the sweetest and dearest little bedroom that ever a small boy slept in. Fresh white dimity curtains hang round the window. On the wall-paper pink cherubs hover leisurely over wreaths of green leaves and blue flowers; and there stands the aforementioned little bed, draped with pink rosebuds and cherry ribbons.

'Oh!' is all Bobbie can find words for as Mrs. Cuddles ushers him into the room; and then she leaves him there to tell the Lord Jesus about his little cousin, sick and suffering at home.

When Bobbie comes downstairs again, he finds Mr. Smith in the dining-room waiting dinner for him.

The doctor has brought a bundle of clothing for Bobbie—'lady-bird suit' not excepted. True, Nurse Nelly had insisted upon putting in 'black-beetles' too; 'but we needn't wear it, you know, Bobbie,' Mr. Smith says.

After dinner Bobbie goes the round of the

house, returning at last to the dispensary, where Mr. Smith's boy is busy making decoctions in bottles, and arranging labels.

'You're "Tom," aren't you?' says Bobbie, addressing the lad. 'Yes! Mr. Smith has often told us about you. You put the wrong bottles in the basket one day, didn't you? and so Mr. Smith very nearly gave old Hodding some stuff that he oughtn't to have had! And—oh, yes!—you're the boy that he calls "the nearest 'pproach to an idiot," arn't you?'

The boy grins, and Bobbie seats himself on a high stool, whence he watches the mixing with intense interest, and helps to stick on some of the labels.

Bobbie and Tom soon become firm friends over their work, and finally Bobbie even goes so far as to promise Tom that he will bring Birdie to see him some day when she is well again.

'I suppose you've never seen a little girl before?' says Bobbie.

Tom admits that he has; indeed, that he

has sisters of his own at home, of all shapes and sizes.

'Well, anyway,' concludes Bobbie, 'you've never seen a girl *half* so beautiful as my Birdie. Your sisters are nothing like her, of course!'

Tom grins again. Then Bobbie tumbles off his stool, finds his way to the kitchen, and stands with feelings of mingled awe and delight before a whole row of cakes, ranging from one end of the long dresser to the other. He attempts to count all the currants visible on one, but stops breathless before he has got quite half round it; and oh! what a hidden wealth of currant, plum, and candied peel must it not contain besides! Bobbie feels convinced that Mrs. Cuddles ought to be deeply thankful that she will not have to defray the expenses of those glorious cakes.

'I only wish my Birdie could have some too!' he says.

'She couldn't eat 'em, poor little dear, if she had!' answers Mrs. Cuddles; 'but Tom is going to take a little egg-pudding, nice and light, up to the cottage by-and-by. I

straight in me, when I did things as I shouldn't—"sin," I s'pose. And God didn't like it, so He made me feel uncomfor'ble-like. An' how'll we get our hearts washed, miss?'

'How does mother make your frocks clean when they get dirty, Polly?'

'I 'ad but one till this 'ere one comed,' answers little Polly; 'an' when that were dutty, she tuck soap an' warter till 't.'

'And the water made your frock clean,' continues Marion. 'Well, it is just so that our hearts must be washed to make them clean from sin. Can you tell me the name of the first washing our souls receive, Nelly?'

'Baptism,' answers Nelly.

'Tell little Polly what Baptism is, Birdie,' says Marion.

'To be washed by the priest in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,' Birdie says slowly. 'In Baptism we are forgiven the sin born in us, and any sins that we have done besides; and we are made God's children, and members of His Church.'

'Do you understand, little Polly?' Marion

asks, gazing sorrowfully at the poor little neglected child to whom these first truths of religion are so new and strange.

'Sommut,' answers little Polly. 'I'd like to be weshed—my heart, I mean. Is it them people as has clean hearts as'll go to live i' that beautiful place as little master and missie tell 't me on; where they see God, and has white frocks, an' crowns on their heads, an' where there's the music an' the singin', an' where the Lord Jesus and her as is called Our Lady lives always?'

'Yes, that is it,' says Marion. 'I shall speak to Father Earle about you, little Polly, and we must have you made a little Catholic.'

'So as I'll be weshed!' answers little Polly. 'I'd like to go to that grand place some day—ever so! An' will there be buttons all shinin' to my white frock there, think ye?'

Bobbie shakes his head vigorously at little Polly, but she is not to be daunted.

'Now we are going to talk about Confession—how we may get the sins we commit after Baptism forgiven,' says Marion; 'and I hope everybody will ask "Why?" a great

many times. We will all try to answer the "whys." What is Confession, Bobbie?'

'It is to accuse ourselves of our sins to a priest,' answers Bobbie. 'Why?'

'When you have done something that Nurse Nelly told you not, it makes you feel——'

'Uncomfor'ble,' interrupts Bobbie, who is well acquainted with the feeling.

'Yes, and unhappy, because you have grieved her. But when you have confessed it —told it all to nurse—and she has forgiven you, and told you to think no more about it, you feel happy and comfortable again?'

'Oh, *very!*' says Bobbie decidedly.

'And just so, when God's little children have sinned against Him and grieved His love, their first thought is to tell Him all about it, and how sorry they are. They can't go directly to Him, but He has put His priest in His own place to listen to them, and to forgive them in His Name. Confession takes away our sins and makes us happy. That is "why," Bobbie. And how many things have we to do to prepare for Confession, Birdie?'

'Four things,' answers Birdie.

'And the first is, "We must heartily pray to God for His grace to help us." Why must we do that, Bobbie?'

'Well, because we can't do anything without Him,' says Bobbie decidedly. 'I've tried if I could keep good without Him for a very little time—just *to see*, you know; but I couldn't. We can't do the leastest thing without God. And then we've got to get our "being sorry" from God, 'cos it belongs to Him. We can't feel a bit sorry for being naughty, if we don't get our "being sorry" from Him. And we can't know how naughty we are, unless God shows us ourselves.'

'Quite right, Bobbie. And what is the next thing we must do, Ermine?'

'We must carefully examine our conscience,' says Ermine, the lawyer's little daughter.

'Yes. Our hearts are like little houses, and we have to take care of them. Every day we should take conscience with us into them, like a broom, to sweep out all the dust and dirt. God's grace is like opening the windows of our hearts; it lets light in on our sins. We must clean out all the corners, and leave no

secret cupboards shut up with secret sins in them. Then very often we must bring the sins we find to confession, and have them all put away, and a clean little heart-house left, in which God will love to come and dwell.'

'Do you mean that we are to poke out all the *wee* sins we've ever done?' asks Nelly Creith. 'It would be so hard; I don't think we could ever remember all. Would God be angry if we forgot something, Marion?'

'God doesn't ask us to do impossible things, nor even very hard things, when He says, "Tell Me your sins, be sorry for them, and I will forgive you." We are not to go worrying ourselves because we think "There *might* be a sin *here*, but I can't find it; or *there*, if I could only see it!" So long as you would be sorry if you could find it, because it would grieve our dear Lord's Heart, then never mind. If it is there, He will find it and forgive it. We are only *obliged* to tell the big sins—mortal sins, that kill our souls. The others love and sorrow make us tell, so that we may be made happy by feeling *quite sure* that they are forgiven, and not hanging like

little black clouds between our souls and God.'

'But how can we *know* always whether we have committed a mortal sin or not?' asks Ermine.

'If you had on a clean white frock, Ermine, and you spilt some ink over it, would it not be very easy to count the black spots?'

'Yes, of course; I couldn't help seeing them.'

'And so you can see at once, when God gives you His grace, whether your soul is stained by mortal sin. Don't you find it easy to know when you have grieved your mother, Ermine, by doing something very naughty that she has told you not? Directly you have done the naughty act, I know your heart feels heavy because you love her, and conscience says, "You have done what mother told you not." The next thought is, "I have grieved her, though she loves me so much, and I love her." And the next, "I must make it all right between mother and me by telling her I am very sorry, and that I will not do it again.' And then, of course, mother forgives and for-

gets. So with God's little children. They know directly when they have wounded Him by mortal sin. It makes such a black stain on their souls. All the world seems black and dark to them. They miss God's smile. They dare not look up brightly into His Face, and tell Him how they love Him. Sin comes between until they are sorry—confess it, and it is forgiven—and everything made straight again. God's little ones who love Him may be quite sure that, unless they know and feel it on their souls, they have not committed a mortal sin.'

'How good it is of God to let us make it all straight with Him after we have grieved Him so many times!' says Bab Gardiner, Bobbie's friend of the blue ribbons. 'Does everybody know how to come back to God when they have sinned, Miss Earle?'

Marion sighs as she answers:

'The little children outside the Church do not know it. I wish they did! They don't even know that there is any difference between one sin and another. They think that God will send them to hell for the smallest venial

sin. When they have sinned, they can only pray to God to forgive them, and try to hope that He has. They don't *know certainly,* as we do, that if we do our best to find out our sins by the help of God's grace, to be sorry for and confess them, and promise to do better for the future, we come out of the Confessional forgiven—all clear between us and God! I think it is this that makes Catholic children so light-hearted and happy. Their sins are not always weighing on their souls. They confess them, are forgiven, and start afresh with a good courage. But the children outside the Church *cannot be sure* that they are forgiven, that they will go to heaven, unless they *feel* that they are saved; and when the poor, changeable feeling goes, they are miserable, if they care at all about their souls. Thank God very often, children, that you belong to the true Church, which *alone* gives you such help in saving your souls; and pity and pray for the poor little ones without, that they may be brought in!—But to go back to our subject, children. You must remember this, that it is not enough to stop at the second point of

examining our conscience, and piling all our sins together in a heap. Many people stop there, and are satisfied because they have made a clear list of their sins. But it is like sweeping all the litter and dirt and cobwebs of our heart-house into the middle of the rooms, and leaving it there. What an untidy dirty house it would be still! We must sweep it all out, and have it thrown away. And so we come to the third thing we have to do to prepare for Confession—*the most important thing*—because nothing will be of any use without it. Tell me what it is I mean, Lennie Barnes?'

'We must take time and care to make a good act of contrition,' answers Lennie.

'Yes; no amount of poking about in our consciences for sins, and arranging them all in good order in front of us—such, so many, so many times, so little, so big—is of any use without the "act of contrition"—the really being sorry for our sins. Then don't let us spend all our time in piling our sins together, but in trying to be very sorry for them, so that they may be forgiven when we confess

them. Let us think: My sins have grieved my Father; my sins have wounded the Sacred Heart of my dearest Lord; my sins turn away the Holy Spirit from me; my sins make my Guardian Angel hide his face and weep; my sins hurt my own soul—the soul for which my dear Lord died, and which He wants to be good and true, so that it may see God in heaven always when I die.'

'Must we tell God we are sorry out of a book, Miss Earle?' asks Willie Barnes. ''Cos I can't read nicely yet, and the words don't come out of *me* somehow, when I try to be sorry out of a book.'

'Then don't use a book, Willie. If Our Lord were here, and you wanted to tell Him you were sorry for something you had done, should you tell Him so out of a book?'

'No, Miss Earle,' the little boy answers brightly. 'I see! I should get on His knee, very close to Him, and say, "Dear Lord Jesus, I am *so* sorry. I won't do it any more."'

'And that is all He wants now, Willie. It is not the words, but the *heart*, that He cares

about. And now, children, Willie has given us our fourth point. What is it?'

'We must resolve by the help of God to renounce our sins, and to begin a new life for the future,' says Bab Gardiner from her couch.

'Yes; we must make up our minds *never* to offend God by those sins again; to put them right away from us; to say, as Willie did, "I won't do it any more." What use would it be to confess our sins, and say with our lips "I am sorry for them," if all the while we say in our hearts, "But I shall take no pains to prevent doing the same thing again!" And now, children, just a word about Penance. It means doing whatever the priest gives us to do when we have confessed our sins. But that is not generally enough to satisfy God for all our sins, the Catechism tells us; so we should add other penances to it.'

'What sort of penances, Marion?' asks Bobbie.

'Shelling peas for Nurse Nelly, when we want to be playing in the garden, Bobbie! Giving up our own will and way, when we want

to keep them. Not always finding the easiest path for our feet to walk in, but the one which will bring God the greatest glory. Bearing our little everyday crosses so patiently that no one but our Guardian Angel, perhaps, sees that they are crosses. Helping to lift other people's crosses now and then. Trying always and in everything to be like our crucifixes, Bobbie. That is how we may do penance, children, for our sins, lay up treasure in heaven, and bring glory to our dear Lord.'

Marion has no time to say more, for a hymn is given out, and the whole school rises, to sing—

'We come to Thee, sweet Saviour!
Just because we need Thee so.'

Little Polly's eyes glisten, and something like tears shine in them, as she listens to the many sweet voices singing:

'We come to Thee, sweet Saviour!
None will have us, Lord, but Thee;
And we want none but Jesus,
And His grace that makes us free.
O bountiful salvation!
O life eternal won!
O plentiful redemption!
O Blood of Mary's Son!'

'I'm coming agin to that theer Sunday class o' yourn,' she announces to Bobbie and Birdie, as the children walk home together when school is over; 'an' then maybe I'll hear a bit more o' Him as they call the Lord Jesus. I'd like to know *a deal* about Him!'

CHAPTER XII.

LOST IN SHERWOOD FOREST.

THE long hot summer afternoon is passing away, and the cool of the delicious summer evening beginning to make itself felt very pleasantly. So think our two little friends, Bobbie and Birdie, as they sit in the tiny front garden of the cottage, and amuse themselves with watching the passers-by.

'I do wish there was something pleasant to do!' sighs Bobbie, fanning his very heated countenance with an elder-bough; 'and that those tiresome gnats wouldn't tease so, Birdie!'

'Well, *I* think it's nice enough to watch

the people,' says Birdie. 'Old Hodding's just been by with his donkey. I wish he didn't beat it so, Bobbie! Oh, who is that ugly boy, Bobbie, staring at us so hard?'

'I *do* believe it's the Doctor's Tom!' cries Bobbie, throwing aside his elder-bough, and springing to his feet and the railings with one bound. 'Holloa, Tom, where are you going to? Here's my Birdie. Come and see her.'

'I thought as it were you, Master Bobbie,' says Tom, coming up to the railings; 'but I weren't right sartin about it. And so *that's* the little miss as you set such store on, is it?'

Tom's eyes fix themselves on Birdie's face inquisitively, until she turns quite shy, and would like to run away, only that Bobbie would scold her if she did such a thing.

'Well,' asks Bobbie, much as if Tom were inspecting a pet animal of his, 'what do you think of her, Tom?' And Tom's reply gives one much the same idea too.

'Well, Master Bobbie, I should say she's a beautiful creetur'!'

'You haven't told me where you are off to yet,' says Bobbie.

'A rare fine woodpecker's nest in the forest,' is Tom's reply; 'like to come too, and bring little missie along?'

'Well, I should very much,' replies Bobbie joyfully. 'I'll run in, and ask Nurse Nelly if we may.'

Bobbie disappears indoors, but hardly a minute elapses before he is out again, with such a beamingly happy face that permission seems written on it in very large type.

'All right!' he cries; 'she says we may. But you're to be sure not to lose us, Tom; and we're to be back by eight *punct'ally*.'

'All right!' says Tom, in true boy-fashion; and then the three wend their way to the forest.

Once under the shade of the cool green oaks, the children forget dust, heat, and everything else, in a perfect sense of enjoyment.

How pleasantly their feet fall upon the soft, rich leaf-mould, or upon the crisp bracken, bruising it until it scents the air with a pure sweet forest smell! How melodiously the wood-pigeons join in a cooing chorus far overhead!

On they march, over leaf, and bracken, and moss, to the tree in which the woodpecker's nest is supposed to be. But, lo and behold, when they reach it, not the faintest vestige of a nest is visible!

Tom goes round and round the tree, climbs it, examines every branch carefully, but finds never a trace of it. Finally he looks rather puzzled.

'Is it there, Tom?' asks Bobbie eagerly.

Contrary to his principles with regard to bird-cruelty, Bobbie is taking the deepest interest in this search for the woodpecker's nest. Tom has persuaded him, with a great flow of eloquence, that the power of calculation possessed by birds is extremely small; and so long as you leave them *one* egg, they will never miss the rest—a fact of which I am by no means so well assured.

'Well, if it ain't mortal vanished!' exclaims poor Tom, in great vexation of spirit. 'Either it weren't never here, an' I've bin a-dreamin' on it; or some feller's bin here afore me an' tuck it, which ain't likely; or it's in some

other tree as I've mistuck for this. But I made sartin sure *it were* this !'

'Come on further,' cries Bobbie; 'and I dare say we shall find it.'

So on they go, through endless trees, and down the broad, green paths, until at last Tom stops short, gives a sharp whistle, and in one second is scrambling up an oak as nimbly as a cat.

'If this here ain't the tree, I'm much mistaken !' he calls down to the children from the branches. 'There's a nest here, and a good un, you may depend !'

'Oh !' exclaim both Bobbie and Birdie in one breath.

Another gloriously-expectant moment, and Tom descends again with two wood-pigeon's eggs.

''Tain't the 'pecker's, arter all,' he grunts. 'But there be two eggs, one for each of yer breakfusses. My ! Bless me ! Look what's on my trowses, Master Bobbie ? It must ha' comed on 'em off o' that 'ere ould tree !'

Sure enough, Tom's afore-mentioned garments are nicely besprinkled with a sticky

sort of mixture. Bobbie and Birdie examine closely both the tree and Tom's habiliments. On the former they discover a sticky compound, smelling strongly of rum, which perfectly corresponds with the varnish poor Tom has received.

'Yes, it's off the tree,' says Bobbie. 'Who's ever put it there, I wonder?'

'Some one as is after the moths,' replies Tom.

'I reckon they'd be 'stounded, like, to see what a whopper they've cotched! Guess I'll have to let it be while I get home, too.'

'What do the moths do with the nasty stuff?' asks Birdie.

'They heats it, little missie, an' they sticks to it; an' then them as wants 'em, claps 'em into their boxes, an' sets 'em on pins to look pretty.'

'Oh!' cries tender-hearted little Birdie, aghast. 'Are people so cruel as to do that to the nice brown moths?'

'It's them moths as is so stupid to come and get cotched!' says Tom.

'Were *you* stupid to get smeared, Tom?' asks Bobbie gravely.

Tom takes no notice of Bobbie's question.

'I fancy that there tree i' the distance may be the one where the nest lies,' he says. 'Anyway, we'd best go and see.'

So off they trudge. But that tree, too, proves a deception; and the next—and the next.

'It's my belief as I've dreamt it, arter all!' says Tom at last. 'And we mustn't go no further seekin' on it, anyway; for it strikes me it's nigh upon eight o'clock.'

So, with many a sigh of disappointment they turn back down the cool, green paths; then, on and on, down many another. At last they come to a wide-spreading plantation of the graceful silver-birch, which stand in beautiful contrast to the majestic grandeur of the oak-avenue they have just left. It is the meeting-place of fairies and giants.

Bobbie and Birdie give a little scream of delight. They have never, in all their forest rambles, come so far as this. But Tom looks about him with a very puzzled expression of countenance.

'It *can't* not be that I've been and gone and

lost us!' he mutters under his breath. (Tom's intimacy with grammar does not extend to the knowledge that two negatives make an affirmative.)

'I thought I know'd every yard o' the forest for miles round. But it strikes me this is Birkland; and, if so, we've come a precious deal out of our way, and no mistake!'

No; there *is* no mistake. This is Birkland.

Tom wheels about, and takes a road that, to tell the truth, he knows no more about than that, for the present, it turns to the right.

Bobbie glances at him rather suspiciously, but says nothing.

So they trudge on; and the road splits into many small paths—many, many times; and as often, Tom gallantly rushes down one, hoping to get out of the forest somehow.

'It can't surely have *no end* to it,' he mutters to himself by way of consolation.

'I'm *so* tired!' complains poor Birdie at last; 'I don't think I can go any further. Haven't we come a very, very long way, Tom?'

'Poor little missie!' says Tom, in a troubled

voice; 'get howd o' my hand, an' I'll help you on a bit. I'd offer to carry you, but for that nasty stuff off the tree as is all ovver me.'

And so they go on to the next splitting of the path. Here Birdie declares she can go no further, and Bobbie's little legs are stiff and aching sadly, though he would not for worlds say so.

'We are *lost*, Tom,' he whispers, in a voice full of awe; '*lost* in the great, big forest! *I know* we are; and it's getting dark!'

'We *won't* be lost long, Master Bobbie, never you fear!' is Tom's answer, spoken as cheerfully as the lump that has come into his throat will allow. 'I'll tell you what! You stay here with little missie, while I go and seek out the right way home, and then I'll come back and fetch you. Don't you fright her Master Bobbie,' he whispers, as he disappears among the dark shadows of the trees.

'Isn't it *dreadful* to be lost, Bobbie!' says poor Birdie, crouching down on the moss; 'I don't like it at all.'

'I don't know,' answers Bobbie; remembering Tom's injunction, he feels bound to make

the best of the case; 'I—I think I rather—like it.'

Then they wait in silence for what seems to them—poor little lonely children!—a long, weary while; and meantime the shadows grow deeper, darkness is drawing round them like a thick, close curtain, and still no Tom appears to gladden the two pair of eyes that are watching so eagerly for his return!

Birdie creeps close to Bobbie, and he puts his arms about her protectingly. However much afraid *he* may be, *Birdie* shall not be 'frighted,' he resolves in his brave little soul, striving hard to conquer his own fear.

Still the terrible darkness grows more dense. They can scarcely see even a little way before them now. Stars peep down upon them from the distant sky, through the breaks in that leafy roof above them—lit one by one, like far-away golden lamps.

'Is Our Lord here, Bobbie?' asks Birdie at last, in a very subdued whisper. She cannot bear to hear her own voice echoing loudly among the trees of the lonely forest.

'I think so,' answers Bobbie. 'Yes—because He is *everywhere.*'

'He would help us not to be frightened, if we asked Him,' whispers Birdie again.

Instantly Bobbie folds his hands, and looking up at the bright sky-lamps shining down on them both, he whispers—so earnestly that occasionally the words come spoken quite aloud, and the echo of the great forest carries them hither and thither among its trees—

'Dear Lord up in heaven, Birdie and me are *lost in Your great, big forest;* and we're *very* frightened, 'cause it's getting dark, and Tom's gone—so we're all alone. *Please* take care of us, and help us not to be frightened *any more.* Oh!—and *please* show Tom the way out of the forest!'

'I was afraid we should be like the "Babes in the Wood," you know,' whispers Bobbie. 'Nobody finding us, and getting all cold and dead. That would have been *dreadful!*'

'Then there'd have been the robins to cover us up,' says Bobbie, by way of comfort. 'Birdie, Tom's a *very* long time coming for us!'

'And it's *so* cold,' says Birdie, with a little shiver. 'I think we'd better get up and walk about a bit, Bobbie.'

'We will go to the end of this walk,' says Bobbie; 'and then perhaps we shall meet Tom. Hold my hand, Birdie, and step very carefully. I wish it wasn't quite so dark!'

Both the children struggle on to their feet, and trudge down the path; feeling their way cautiously, to avoid the deep prints of horses' hoofs.

They come to the end of it at length, and then Bobbie proposes that they should try another path that seems to wind away among the birches. Birdie, nothing loth, consents; and the weary little couple plod on.

Suddenly Birdie stops short, and gives a sharp scream, which resounds through the forest so loudly that she cries again as she hears its echo.

'What is it?' gasps Bobbie, trembling and standing still.

'The light!' cries Birdie, between her sobs. 'Oh, it was *dreadful!*'

'If you saw a light, it's because a house is

near,' consoles Bobbie; 'but I can only see darkness.'

'No, no; it *isn't* a house,' sobs Birdie. 'It's running about; there! Don't you see it again?'

Sure enough, a bright light flits past in the distance. Bobbie sees it too, this time. It seems to be advancing gradually nearer to them—at whiles hidden behind the trees—then shimmering out into the darkness clearer than before.

'It's a lantern,' whispers Bobbie in a frightened tone. 'Creep behind this tree with me, Birdie, and crouch down as low as you can. I hope there isn't a bad man with it; or—or—Robin Hood, who isn't really dead, after all!—Birdie, let's say some Hail Mary's for Our Lady to take care of us.'

Trembling in every limb, the children throw themselves down into the midst of the tall bracken growing close up to the trunk of the tree. Birdie chokes down her sobs, and almost chokes herself with the effort; while poor Bobbie holds his breath for fear. Zig-zag advances the light towards them, now dancing

along through the birches, now shining steadily above the path—always nearer and nearer.

Then it stands still for a moment, and a man's voice calls out loudly:

'Help is near. Where are you? Call "Cooey!"'

'Oh, Bobbie dear—*is* that Robin Hood's voice?' whispers poor Birdie.

'I don't know,' whispers Bobbie back again; 'I hardly think so. It isn't like an old man's voice, and Robin Hood must be getting quite an old man by this time. Shall I call "Cooey?"'

Before Birdie can answer, the light of the lantern flashes full upon them, and reveals to them the form of a tall, pleasant-looking gentleman bending over them.

Birdie gives a little shriek, and hides away her face; but the more courageous Bobbie asks with a trembling voice:

'Please, sir—you aren't Robin Hood, are you?'

'I am Mr. Gardiner, of Lonerton Grange,' the tall man answers; 'And who are you, my little man? How came you to be here? And why didn't you call "Cooey," as I bade you?'

'I am Bobbie, and this is my Birdie,'

answers Bobbie, quite reassured; and, jumping up from the bracken cover, he puts his little hand in that of Mr. Gardiner quite trustfully. 'We got lost in the forest, Mr. Gardiner. Come along, Birdie—it isn't Robin Hood! We were afraid it *was* him when we saw the light, so we kept quite quiet. Will you take us home now?' we live with Nurse Nelly at Floral Cottage.'

Mr. Gardiner takes Birdie in his arms and carries her, for she is far too weary to walk. Bobbie trudges along manfully by his side.

Then he asks Bobbie how they came to be out all alone in the forest, and at that time of night too. Bobbie tells him all about it, and how poor Tom is most probably still continuing his nocturnal travels in the forest.

'Poor Nurse Nelly will be *so* frightened,' says Birdie. 'She said we were to be back by eight o'clock.'

'And it's past ten now,' says Mr. Gardiner. 'What do you call your nurse's name, my dear?'

'Nurse Nelly,' repeats Birdie.

'I surely am familiar with the name,' *mutters* the artist-painter, as Mrs. Cuddles

calls him, to himself: 'Where can I have met with it?' Then he adds aloud, 'What is your mother's name, dear?'

'I haven't one down here,' Birdie says quite simply. 'Jesus took her up to be with Him a little while ago.'

'Were *you* lost in the forest too, Mr. Gardiner?' inquires Bobbie. 'Or what were you doing?'

'Catching moths for my collection, Bobbie. There are some good ones to be found here in the forest.'

'Ah, then! *You* put that sticky stuff on the tree, didn't you?'

'Yes,' answers Mr. Gardiner. 'Wh, Bobbie?'

'Oh, only Tom's trousers!' says Bobbie. 'He climbed up a tree, you know, to get a woodpecker's nest we thought was there, and when he came down, he was all brown and stickied.'

The 'artist-painter' laughs heartily when he hears that, and Birdie is not afraid now as she hears the merry echo ringing through and through the old forest.

'What did you do when you found you were lost, Bobbie?' asks Mr. Gardiner.

'Well, first Tom went to find the way home,' says Bobbie; 'and we waited for him a good while, and when Tom didn't come, we got frightened, and Birdie thought we should be like the "Babes in the Wood." So then we asked God not to let us be frightened, and to help us to get out of the forest; so I s'pose He's sent *you*.'

'Yes,' says Mr. Gardiner. 'And where do you suppose the boy is?'

'The Doctor's Tom?' says Bobbie. 'Well, we told the Lord Jesus about *him* too, so I s'pose he'll get home all right.'

'I'll send my man to look him up when we get home,' says Mr. Gardiner.

By the time they reach the road that winds down from the forest into Lonerton, little tired Birdie's blue eyes are close shut, and she is fast asleep. Such a heavy little burden, she lies in Mr. Gardiner's arms. He sighs as he thinks of his own little sick child at home, who is more like a feather in weight than anything else.

At the gate of the little cottage, Bobbie falls straight into Nurse Nelly's arms. The faithful old nurse has been waiting about there ever since the clock struck eight; blaming herself over and over again for having been so foolish as to trust her darlings to the care of that rattle-pated boy, and declaring herself guilty of all the misfortunes that had befallen, or could possibly befal them. Now, as she sees them again all safe and sound, her joy is quite past expression.

Mr. Gardiner gives the sleeping Birdie into her arms; and, without waiting for Nelly's breathless, incoherent words of thanks and thankfulness, he hurries away to set his man on Tom's track in the forest.

As he hurries on to the Grange, he mutters to himself:

'It is strange that that woman's face and name should both recall to my mind old times so vividly! Have I ever seen her before? and if so, where?'

Bobbie and Birdie are soon nestling in their little cribs, and struggling between sleepiness and hunger to swallow the basinful of warm

food that Nurse Nelly brings them. No bad results follow from their night in the forest, though Nurse Nelly is anxiously on the look-out for them; and Bobbie and Birdie, now that the time of terror is past, look on it as rather a pleasant adventure than otherwise.

The Doctor's Tom was soon discovered in the forest, calling the children by name, and brought home by Mr. Gardiner's man. He came afterwards, very repentant for having lost the children, to ask Nurse Nelly's forgiveness; and though she granted it very readily, she declares that never another boy will she trust with her bairns again.

CHAPTER XIII.

BIRDIE'S LETTER, AND BEING GROWN-UP.

'Merry, happy childhood,
Free of care and fears!
Wherefore would ye mimic
Those of older years?
Keep your childhood, children,
Long as e'er ye may;
Faces soon grow careworn,
And the hair turns grey!'

'KNOCK, knock-a-knock!' goes the knocker on *the little* green entrance-door of Floral Cottage.

Who is there? Bobbie and Birdie peep through the tiny parlour window, and catch just a glimpse of Mr. Gardiner, their friend of the forest, standing at the door.

'Knock-a-knock, knock!' rather louder this time.

'What *shall* we do, Bobbie?' asks Birdie. 'Nurse Nelly's out. Shall we keep still, and pretend there's nobody at home?'

'It would be *a lie, to pretend,* Birdie,' is Bobbie's rather sharply-spoken reply. 'We couldn't act *a lie!*. *You* must open the door, because you're the lady; and I'll stand behind and tell you what to say. Quick, Birdie! he's waiting.'

Birdie flies to the door, and opens it very shyly. Bobbie takes up his position somewhere in the rear, ready to prompt her, as occasion requires.

'Is Nurse Nelly at home, little woman?' asks Mr. Gardiner.

'Say, "No, sir, I'm afraid not; but won't you please step in?"' prompts Bobbie from the background; adding, in an undertone 'That's what Nurse Nelly always says.'

Birdie obediently repeats his words.

Mr. Gardiner's mouth twitches at the corners in an odd sort of way, and his eyes twinkle merrily; but Birdie is altogether too much absorbed in the solemnity of the occasion to notice it.

'Thank you. I will come in for a minute, he says.

'Hold the door *wide* open, Birdie!' prompts Bobbie.

Birdie throws it back against the wall.

'Now show him into the parlour,' commands Bobbie.

Birdie takes Mr. Gardiner's hand in hers to lead him in.

Bobbie frowns. *That* is not at all the way in which Nurse Nelly ushers gentlemen into the parlour!

'What next?' whispers Birdie, coming back to the door for fresh instructions, having safely deposited her visitor in the parlour.

'Have you said, "Will you take a seat, sir?"' inquires Bobbie. 'That's what ought to come next.'

Birdie shakes her head, and, going back

into the parlour, tugs a big chair forward from the row against the wall, and repeats Bobbie's words.

'Now, isn't it time for me to sit down?' inquires Birdie, coming to the door.

'Yes,' whispers Bobbie. 'And the next thing is to ask, "How are all at home, sir?" And then——'

'Is that my friend of the forest there?' says Mr. Gardiner from the parlour, interrupting the prompter in a most unpolite fashion.

Bobbie comes forward, and shakes hands vigorously.

'Most happy to see you, sir, and to have the pleasure of renewing an acquaintance begun under such inauspicious circumstances,' says Mr. Gardiner.

Bobbie glances quickly into his face, with a look that seems to say, 'You're not poking fun at me, are you?' but Mr. Gardiner's countenance is perfectly composed and solemn. So Bobbie sits down.

'How are all at home?' he asks gravely.

'All as well as usual when I last saw them,

thank you,' answers Mr. Gardiner, also gravely. 'I hope I see you well, sir?'

'Oh yes!' says Bobbie cheerfully. 'I'm *never* ill. And Birdie's very well too, and so's Nurse Nelly. I'm sorry she's out.'

'I'm sorry, too; but I came especially to see you. Miss Birdie, my little Bab has sent me with a note for you.'

'*For me?*' exclaims Birdie, slipping down quickly from the chair where she had been perching in state, and holding out her hands eagerly for the letter.

'We don't ever get letters,' says Bobbie; 'at least, not since Aunt Hester died. But Nurse Nelly's got one upstairs, that she's keeping safe until Aunt Hester's brother comes for it.'

'What is Aunt Hester's brother's name, Bobbie?' asks Mr. Gardiner, looking very earnestly into Bobbie's face.

'I don't know his *real* name,' says Bobbie. 'I only know he'll be our Uncle Charlie when he comes. But we are not sure whether he ever *will* come. He might be dead, you know! If he *does*, we hope he will come back kind

and good. He wasn't kind and good at all before. Do you know, he was what they call *a bad Catholic*—and that's something very terrible. And *I don't think*,' in an awe-stricken whisper, 'he ever said his prayers!'

'What *shall* I do, Bobbie?' asks Birdie, turning to her cousin with a very puzzled face, and showing him the dainty little note she has just opened and read. 'This is from the little girl with the blue ribbons. She wants us to go and play with her to-morrow afternoon. What shall I write back to her?'

'Oh,' says Bobbie, glancing over the letter in business-like fashion, 'say we'll come, of course.'

'But I don't know how to,' answers poor Birdie rather dismally.

'Come upstairs, Birdie,' says Bobbie, 'and I'll find you something in the newspaper to copy.'

Birdie goes obediently, and presently Bobbie returns with a satisfied look on his face.

'Letters are *very* tiresome things to write,' he remarks. 'I'm very glad I've never had to write one myself! They're great troubles,

too. I've seen Nurse Nelly crying on the top of that one upstairs heaps of times! Do you know, I should like to see Uncle Charlie very much, and so would Birdie. I hope he's turned a good man by now!'

'Was he bad before, then?' asks Mr. Gardiner.

'Well, *I* think so,' says Bobbie gravely. 'It's wrong not to be a good Catholic, isn't it? And it's wrong not to love people—and he didn't.'

'Didn't he?' asks Mr. Gardiner.

'No,' says Bobbie; 'and that's why he was so bad. He got cross with Aunt Hester, too, when she told him how naughty he was, and said he wouldn't ever see her again. And, do you know, I think he would be very sorry now if he knew that she was dead; but Nurse Nelly can't find him.'

'And you think she would forgive him now, Bobbie, do you? and that he would be a *good* Catholic again?'

'Yes,' says Bobbie decidedly; 'I *know* he would.'

'How do you know?'

'Because Birdie and me say a rosary for him to be sent back to us good every night and morning,' says Bobbie; 'so that we could be all happy together. So *that's* sure, isn't it?'

'Yes, Bobbie; *quite sure.*'

Then in comes Birdie, her cheeks flushed with long bending over her paper, and her tiny fingers all tipped with ink.

'Will this do for Bab?' she asks shyly, bringing her blotted letter for Mr. Gardiner to see before she folds it up.

Mr. Gardiner reads:

'SIR' (Birdie has put a line through *that;* it *did* sound rather odd, though it *was* in the newspaper Bobbie had brought her)—'DEAR BAB,—I must say that I can heartily recommend' (here Birdie had been sorely puzzled. Something about 'seed-preservers' followed, and there was no mention of any such thing in Bab's letter to her. Bobbie must have made a mistake! So Birdie thought a little, and then substituted for 'seed-preservers' a sentence of her own) 'your nice letter. I was

very pleased to get it. Bobbie says I am to say that we will both come.' ('Now I'd better put the rest in like the newspaper,' Birdie had thought; so she copied down upon her paper) 'Trusting that it may meet with the support it deserves, I am, yours respectfully' ('I suppose Bobbie didn't mean me to copy the 'Thomas Hill' at the bottom,' thought Birdie; and she signed herself)

'BIRDIE NOVERY.'

Mr. Gardiner smiles a little as he reads it, but says it is a very nice letter, and Bab will be pleased.

'I'm glad,' says Birdie. 'Then Bobbie and the newspaper *were* right, after all!'

'*Of course!*' says Bobbie.

And Mr. Gardinor takes his departure with the letter.

CHAPTER XIV.

BAB.

'Whence comes thy patient abiding?
Thy joy with this suffering blent?'
Where hast thou learnt, O child of pain!
Thy lesson of sweet content?
It was learnt in the school of pain and of woe,
Where the Father was willing His child should go.'

'I'm very glad you've come, Bobbie and Birdie!' says Bab Gardiner, who is lying on a pretty white couch before the drawing-room window of the Grange.

A thin, pale little face is Bab's still; but a faint tinge of rose-colour has already come to her wan cheeks, borne on the wings of the fresh, sweet country air.

She cannot get down from her couch to greet her two little visitors; but she holds out her hands to them with a smile of welcome. Bobbie and Birdie stoop down and kiss the little pale face.

'Are you ill, Bab?' asks Birdie wistfully.

'Not *ill*, but *not quite well*,' answers Bab, with just the ghost of a smile. 'Mr. Smith

says I never *shall* be *quite* well, as long as I live.'

'*Never!*' echoes Bobbie, in a tone of awe; 'but that's such a *very* long time! I don't believe he knows a bit what will happen such a long way off. *I'll* tell you what, Bab! Birdie and I will ask our Blessed Lord to make you well soon, and we'll ask Our Lady too!'

'Perhaps it wouldn't be the best thing for me to get well,' says Bab slowly and thoughtfully. 'Father says God knows what is best.'

'*Of course* he does,' says Bobbie; 'I didn't mean that. But then, you know, He likes us to ask Him for things. Just as Aunt Hester used to like to have us ask her for what we wanted, though she *often* knew it all the while, and God *always* does. *I'll* tell you what, Bab! We'll ask our Blessed Lord to do just what is best; that'll be *sure* to be right!'

'When were you ill first, Bab? I'm *so* sorry!' says tender-hearted little Birdie.

'Before mother died. I fell downstairs, you *know*, and hurt my back *dreadfully*. And oh,

it was *so* painful, Birdie! I couldn't help crying. And then I cried still more when Mr. Smith came to put the bones right, because they had got wrong. I was very ill for a long time, and oh, so horrid and cross to everyone—even to dear mother, who nursed me until she fell ill too, and died! Then Lottie came to take care of me; and she didn't know how at first, and she used to hurt my back *dreadfully*—and that made me angry with her; and I used to say *such* naughty things, Birdie! It was very hard to bear being ill then, but still I didn't know that I should never be quite well again, until one evening father came in and told me very, very gently, that Mr. Smith said I must lie down on a couch all my life, and never, never be able to run about and play as other children can.'

'*Never* again?' asks Bobbie.

'No, *never!* I don't mind it so very much *now*, but I did *then*. It seemed so very, *very* hard! And I thought Our Lord didn't love me, Birdie, or He wouldn't have sent all the pain—and that was hardest of all to bear!'

'How did you get not to mind being ill?' asks Birdie, who is listening with a very sympathising face.

To little, happy, healthful, joyous Birdie, loss of strength and liberty seems the greatest misfortune imaginable. No longer to be able to run among birds and flowers! to play wild games in the forest shade! but to lie on a couch all day long—to watch others gathering flowers—to see others dance and play, unable to join them—Birdie shudders to think of it!

'Well,' says Bab, 'we were living in London then, you know, Birdie; and Mr. Smith was doctor in a hospital near where we lived. He used to come and see me very often, and sometimes he brought me nice books to read, or pretty playthings. He was *so* kind, Birdie! One day he brought me a most beautiful picture—not a very large one—in a little oval gilt frame. He had bought it at a picture-shop, he said, because he thought the face was so lovely, that it would make me happy to look at it.'

'Whose face was it?' asks Bobbie, greatly interested.

'Father told me that it was Our Lady. He liked it too, and used to stand looking at it so often. Once, when he thought I was asleep, I heard him say to it quite softly, "Poor, poor Hester!" and I wondered who Hester was, and if Our Lady's beautiful face reminded him of her. But he would not tell me. She has *such* a beautiful face, Birdie—like what I fancy angels' faces must be, if one could only see them! She has great big eyes—rather grave, you know—but they look at you in such a comforting sort of way, and follow you everywhere. She has a sweet mouth too, that always seems to say, "Speak softly, my child," when the pain makes me feel inclined to say sharp words to father or Lotty; and oh, such bright dark hair! Birdie, aren't you glad? do you know you make me think of what my picture-Mary must have been when she was a little girl! I thought so when I saw you first in the Cathechism class!'

'*Me!*' exclaims Birdie, very much astonished.

'Yes, I am sure you are. But oh, Birdie! if I only could really *see* Our Lady's own self,

I am sure I should love her ever so much more!'

'You will some day,' says Birdie, 'up in heaven. But, Bab, how did Our Lady's picture help you to be patient, and not to mind being ill so much?—you didn't tell us.'

'Well,' says Bab, 'it was this way. When I told father that I thought Our Lord had sent the pain because He had left off loving me, he said it wasn't that at all. He said Jesus had allowed me to have the pain *just because* He loved me so much—that I might suffer a little for Him, since He bore so much for me patiently. I didn't understand what he meant then, but afterwards, when I was lying quiet, looking up at Our Lady's picture, I saw the meaning all at once quite clearly. You know, Birdie, there is a look in her eyes as if she had had trouble and pain to bear too—like me—and knew all about it. And yet she looks so patient, and so gloriously happy too. You would know what I mean if you saw the picture, Birdie! Well, she just seemed to say to me with her eyes and her *lips,* "Dear child, will you not bear a little

pain for Jesus, because He bore so much for you?" And I looked in her face, and said, "Yes, I will." I saw what she meant. Just that Our Lord was *loving* me, sending me all the pain *through* love; to make me love *Him* more, and know Him better, and to merit more by being patient. I knew how much I needed to be made better, and to have all the crossness and badness taken away; so I thought I would ask Our Lady to take care of me, and to let me have even *more* to bear for Jesus, if it was His will, that I might grow more and more like him. And I asked her very, very often to help me, and she does, Birdie. I don't think I'm cross very many times *now*—even when the pain is so hard to bear!'

'I should like to see your picture ever so much, Bab!' says Bobbie eagerly.

'So you shall, when Lotty comes to carry me upstairs. It hangs there, just beside my bed; and when the pain is very bad, I turn and look up at her sweet comforting face, and she helps me to bear it, Birdie.'

'There are a great many pictures here,

Bab,' says Birdie, looking round the room. 'Who painted all these lovely ones?'

'Father painted most,' says Bab. 'He is painting some of Sherwood Forest now. I think I like those best.'

Presently Lotty—big, strong Lotty—comes to carry her little helpless mistress upstairs. Bobbie and Birdie follow, eager to get a sight of the beautiful picture.

A dainty little room is Bab's, fitted up with every luxury, decked out with rosy chintz and pure white muslin. Any little maiden would have loved such a room.

By the bedside hangs a little oval picture-frame, and in it the lovely face of Our Lady that Bab has described.

Birdie gives a little cry of astonishment when she sees it, and Bobbie exclaims:

'Oh, Birdie! that must be Aunt Hester—I'm sure it must!'

'My own mamma!' cries little Birdie.

CHAPTER XV.

UNCLE CHARLIE.

NURSE NELLY has a visitor this afternoon.

Nurse Nelly has been busy ironing before he came; but her starched clothes will get stiff to-day, and her irons grow cold on the hearth.

Nurse Nelly's visitor is Mr. Gardiner.

He is having a long conversation with her, during which Nelly smiles and cries by turns.

They talk together for a *very* long time. Then Nurse Nelly fetches from upstairs the letter which was her dear, dead mistress's last charge, and which is only to be delivered into the hand of Mrs. Novery's brother.

Yet here is Nurse Nelly presenting it to Mr. Gardiner, and he opens and reads it. Is she going to be unfaithful to her trust? We shall see.

Mr. Gardiner has hardly read a line before

he carries the letter away to the window. Is it that he may be able to see the better; or that there is a strange moisture in his eyes that he would rather Nurse Nelly should not see?

When he has finished reading, he slips the letter into his pocket and comes back to Nurse Nelly.

'Poor Hester!' is all he says; and those were his words when he looked once at Bab's picture.

'And you'll take the pretty little dears to you, won't you, sir?—for her sake!' says Nurse Nelly. 'I've done for 'em my poor best, livin' in hopes as the Lord 'ud send you to 'em in His time; but it's little enough an old woman can do for two such beautiful children!'

'Indeed, they shall be to me as my own, Nelly. It is the best—alas that it should be so!—that I can do for my poor sister now. Would that we had met once more, that I might have been forgiven!'

'I expect she knows all about it, Master Gardiner—for it's my belief she's a saint

in heaven. It's only *us* here, and *she* there!'

'Nelly,' says Mr. Gardiner, 'do you think these little children will bear me any malice?'

'Bless you, sir, no! Never a morning nor a night passes, but what they prays, both of 'em, that the Lord 'll send "Uncle Charlie" to 'em. But—you'll excuse me makin' so bold, sir, for the children's sakes!—I'm told there's a many bad, designing folks in the newspapers, as likes to help themselves to pretty children like my little dears, as ain't noways really related to them. An' if you'll excuse me makin' so bold, sir, wouldn't it be as well for me to see some of the sort of 'stificates, don't they call 'em, from you, sir, afore we breathe a word on it to t' childer?'

'Certainly, Nellie—certainly. Come with me, and I will show you something that will set your mind at rest, and convince you at once that I am no impostor!'

Nurse Nelly puts on her bonnet, and follows Mr. Gardiner to the Grange, and upstairs into Bab's little room. There he leaves her, standing before the likeness of her beloved

mistress—crying, half with joy, half with sorrow.

Not long afterwards she comes downstairs and enters the drawing-room, where the children are playing quietly together—evidently quite unconscious that the uncle who has been lost so long is found again; and Uncle Charlie himself is sitting by, watching their play.

He has waited, that Nurse Nelly may have the joy of breaking the news to her children first.

Nurse Nelly rushes up to Bab's little couch, hugs all three children wildly by turns, much to their amazement; then sits down beside them, and points to Mr. Gardiner with her wrinkled, bony finger.

'Do you see *him?*' she gasps. 'Ay, and ain't he just the picture of your ma as a man, Miss Birdie, darling. He's Uncle Charlie come back, loveys—as you've prayed for nights and mornings. He's going to take care of you both now. And, oh dear, it *do* seem to have taken such a weight off my mind already; for there was him and that letter of *his on it,* too!'

'Will you have me for your Uncle Charlie, Bobbie and Birdie?' asks Mr. Gardiner.

'I will,' declares Bobbie promptly.

'And me too!' says little Birdie, throwing her arms round his neck.

'Then Our Lady in the picture is really like what my Aunt Hester was,' says Bab very happily.

'Did you paint it, Uncle Charlie?' asks Bobbie.

'Yes. A long while ago before Aunt Hester married. Your Aunt Hester was very lovely, and so like a beautiful old picture of the Blessed Virgin, that one day she sat for me when I painted a picture of Our Lady. Some time after, the picture was lost, and we had every reason to believe that it was stolen. Then, a year or two ago, Mr. Smith met with it in a picture-shop, and bought it for my Bab; he didn't know who painted it.'

'Uncle Charlie!' says Bobbie gravely.

'Yes, Bobbie; what is it?'

'May I whisper something to you, Uncle Charlie?'

'You may say it out loud for everybody to hear, Bobbie. I think I know what you want to whisper.'

'Uncle Charlie, are you a good Catholic, and do you say your prayers now and love everybody?'

'Yes, Bobbie,' Mr. Gardiner answers softly and earnestly. 'My dear little Bobbie and Birdie's prayer has been answered of God's great mercy. Uncle Charlie is not going to be a bad Catholic any more.'

'I am *so* glad,' says Bobbie. 'And now, mayn't we all kneel down, and say a great many "Our Father's" and "Hail Mary's" to thank God for having brought us together—you and me, and Birdie and Bab, and Nurse Nelly.'

'Let us kneel and thank God for His great mercies shown us this day,' says Uncle Charlie.

The two children kneel by Nurse Nelly; while Bab, on her sofa, joins her hands in fervent thanksgiving.

'How I shall love my picture now!' Bab says afterwards; 'I am sure it is Our Lady

who has given us all to each other, and made us so happy.'

* * * * *

Now, before our story comes to an end, we will pass over a few years, and take one more look at our friends.

Marion Earle, as Bobbie once proposed to Mrs. Cuddles, is become Marion Smith, and 'lives with the cakes,' as that young gentleman says.

Nurse Nelly spends her old age, for the most part, knitting and reading in an arm-chair which, she declares, suits her old bones to a T; while active Lotty performs the part of nurse to all three children.

Little Bab still reclines on her couch, but the fresh country air has done her so much good, that her life is brightened by the hope that her case is no longer incurable; but that one day, perhaps not *very* far distant, may find her almost as strong and well as our friends Bobbie and Birdie. For that good time little Bab waits patiently and contentedly.

Big Polly's life is brighter far now than it

used to be. Mr. Gardiner finds her regular work at the Grange, with a comfortable cottage to live in; and little Polly works under Lotty in the nursery, hoping in time to become a handy little nursemaid.

And now, good-bye, little Bobbie and Birdie.

THE END.

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